

ROOF^{AND}MEADOW



DALLAS LORE SHARP



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ROOF AND MEADOW

Roof and Meadow

By Dallas Lore Sharp

Author of "Wild Life Near Home"

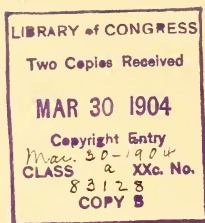
With Illustrations

By Bruce Horsfall



NEW YORK
The Century Co.

1904



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Published April, 1904.

PRINTED BY THE CENTURY CO.

NEW YORK

TO
MY MOTHER

CONTENTS

	PAGE
BIRDS FROM A CITY ROOF	1
THE HUNTING OF THE WOODCHUCK	19
THREE SERMONS	31
THE MARSH	45
CALICO AND THE KITTENS	77
THE SPARROW ROOST	91
"MUX"	107
RACCOON CREEK	121
THE DRAGON OF THE SWALE	147
TICKLE-BIRDS AND THE COCCINELLIDÆ	161
THE CRAZY FLICKER	177
SOME FRIENDLY BIRDS	187
"THE LONGEST WAY ROUND"	199
"ONE FLEW EAST AND ONE FLEW WEST"	213
CHICKAREE	231
BIRD FRIENDSHIPS	251
FARM-YARD STUDIES	261

I wish to thank the editors of "St. Nicholas," the "National Magazine," the "Atlantic Monthly," and the "Youth's Companion" for allowing me to reprint here the chapters of "Roof and Meadow" that first appeared in their pages.

DALLAS LORE SHARP.

BIRDS FROM A CITY ROOF



ROOF AND MEADOW



BIRDS FROM A CITY ROOF

I LAID down my book and listened. It was only the choking gurgle of a broken rain-pipe outside : then it was the ripple and swish of a meadow stream. To make out the voices of redwings and marsh-wrens in the rasping notes of the city sparrows behind the shutter required

much more imagination. But I did it. I wanted to hear, and the splash of the water helped me.

The sounds of wind and water are the same everywhere. Here at the heart of the city I can forget the tarry pebbles and painted tin whenever my rain-pipes are flooded. I can never be wholly shut away from the open country and the trees so long as the winds draw hard down the alley past my window.

But I have more than a window and a broken rain-pipe. Along with my five flights goes a piece of roof, flat, with a wooden floor, a fence, and a million acres of sky. I could n't possibly use another acre of sky, except along the eastern horizon, where the top floors of some twelve-story buildings intercept the dawn.

With such a roof and such a sky, when I must, I can, with effort, get well out of the city. I have never fished nor botanized here, but I have been a-birding many times.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
nor city streets a cage—if one have a roof.

A roof is not an ideal spot for bird study. I would hardly, out of preference, have chosen

this with its soot and its battlement of gaseous chimney-pots, even though it is a university roof with the great gilded dome of a state house shining down upon it. One whose feet have always been in the soil does not take kindly to tar and tin. But anything open to the sky is open to some of the birds, for the paths of many of the migrants lie close along the clouds.

Other birds than the passing migrants, however, sometimes come within range of my lookout. The year around there are English sparrows and pigeons ; and all through the summer scarcely an evening passes when a few chimney-swallows are not in sight.

With the infinite number and variety of chimneys hedging me in, I naturally expected to find the sky alive with swallows. Indeed, I thought that some of the twenty-six pots at the corners of my roof would be inhabited by the birds. Not so. While I can nearly always find a pair of swallows in the air, they are surprisingly scarce, and, so far as I know, they rarely build in the heart of the city. There are more canaries in my block than chimney-swallows in all my sky.

The swallows are not urban birds. The gas, the smoke, the shrieking ventilators, and the ceaseless sullen roar of the city are hardly to their liking. Perhaps the flies and gnats which they feed upon cannot live in the air above the roofs. The swallows want a sleepy old town with big thunderful chimneys, where there are wide fields and a patch of quiet water.

Much more numerous than the swallows are the night-hawks. My roof, in fact, is the best place I have ever found to study their feeding habits. These that flit through my smoky dusk may not make city nests, though the finding of such nests would not surprise me. Of course a night-hawk's *nest*, here or anywhere else, would surprise me; for like her cousin, the whippoorwill, she never builds a nest, but stops in the grass, the gravel, the leaves, or on a bare rock, deposits her eggs without even scratching aside the sticks and stones that may share the bed, and in three days is brooding them — brooding the stones too.

It is likely that some of my hawks nest on the buildings in the neighborhood. Night-hawks' eggs have occasionally been found

among the pebbles of city roofs. The high, flat house-tops are so quiet and remote, so far away from the noisy life in the narrow streets below, that the birds make their nests here as if in a world apart. The twelve- and fifteen-story buildings are as so many deserted mountain heads to them.

None of the birds build on my roof, however. But from early spring they haunt the region so constantly that their families, if they have families at all, must be somewhere in the vicinity. Should I see them like this about a field or thicket in the country it would certainly mean a nest.

The sparrows themselves do not seem more at home here than do these night-hawks. One evening, after a sultry July day, a wild wind-storm burst over the city. The sun was low, glaring through a narrow rift between the hill-crests and the clouds that spread green and heavy across the sky. I could see the lower fringes of the clouds working and writhing in the wind, but not a sound or a breath was in the air about me. Around me over my roof flew the night-hawks. They were crying peevishly and skimming close

to the chimneys, not rising, as usual, to any height.

Suddenly the storm broke. The rain fell as if something had given way overhead. The wind tore across the stubble of roofs and spires; and through the wind, the rain, and the rolling clouds shot a weird, yellow-green sunlight.

I had never seen a storm like it. Nor had the night-hawks. They seemed to be terrified, and left the sky immediately. One of them, alighting on the roof across the street, and creeping into the lee of a chimney, huddled there in sight of me until the wind was spent and a natural sunlight flooded the world of roofs and domes and spires.

Then they were all awing once more, hawking for supper. Along with the hawking they got in a great deal of play, doing their tumbling and cloud-coasting over the roofs just as they do above the fields.

Mounting by easy stages of half a dozen rapid strokes, catching flies by the way, and crying *peent-peent*, the acrobat climbs until I look a mere lump on the roof; then ceasing his whimpering *peent*, he turns on bowed wings and falls

—shoots roofward with fearful speed. The chimneys ! Quick !

Quick he is. Just short of the roofs the taut wings flash a reverse, there is a lightning swoop, a startling hollow wind-sound, and the rushing bird is beating skyward again, hawking deliberately as before, and uttering again his peevish nasal cry.

This single note, the only call he has besides a few squeaks, is far from a song ; farther still is the empty-barrel-bung-hole sound made by the air in the rushing wings as the bird swoops in his fall. The night-hawk, alias “bull-bat,” does not sing. What a name bull-bat would be for a singing bird ! But a “voice” was never intended for the creature. Voice, beak, legs, head—everything but wings and maw was sacrificed for a mouth. What a mouth ! The bird can almost swallow himself. Such a cleft in the head could never mean a song ; it could never be utilized for anything but a fly-trap.

We have use for fly-traps. We need some birds just to sit around, look pretty, and warble. We will pay them for it in cherries or in whatever they ask. But there is also a great need

for birds that kill insects. And first among these are the night-hawks. They seem to have been designed for this sole purpose. Their end is to kill insects. They are more like machines than any other birds I know. The enormous mouth feeds an enormous stomach, and this, like a fire-box, makes the power that works the enormous wings. From a single maw have been taken eighteen hundred winged ants, to say nothing of the smaller fry that could not be identified and counted.

But if he never caught an ant, never one of the fifth-story mosquitos that live and bite till Christmas, how greatly still my sky would need him! His flight is song enough. His cry and eery thunder are the very voice of the summer twilight to me. And as I watch him coasting in the evening dusk, that twilight often falls—over the roofs, as it used to fall for me over the fields and the quiet hollow woods.

There is always an English sparrow on my roof—which does not particularly commend the roof to bird-lovers, I know. I often wish the sparrow an entirely different bird, but I never wish him entirely away from the roof. When

there is no other defense for him, I fall back upon his being a bird. Any kind of a bird in the city! Any but a parrot.

A pair of sparrows nest regularly in an eaves-trough, so close to the roof that I can overhear their family talk. Round, loquacious, familiar Cock Sparrow is a family man—so entirely a family man as to be nothing else at all. He is a success, too. It does me good to see him build. He tore the old nest all away in the early winter, so as to be ready. There came a warm springish day in February, and he began. A blizzard stopped him, but with the melting of the snow he went to work again, completing the nest by the middle of March.

He built for a big family, and he had it. Not “it” indeed, but *them*; for there were three batches of from six to ten youngsters each during the course of the season. He also did a father’s share of work with the children. I think he hated hatching them. He would settle upon the roof above the nest, and chirp in a crabbed, imposed-upon tone until his wife came out. As she flew briskly away, he would look disconsolately around at the bright busy world, ruffle his

feathers, scold to himself, and then crawl dutifully in upon the eggs.

I knew how he felt. It is not in a cock sparrow to enjoy hatching eggs. I respected him; for though he grumbled, as any normal husband might, still he was "drinking fair" with Mrs. Sparrow. He built and brooded and foraged for his family, if not as sweetly, yet as faithfully, as his wife. He deserved his blessed abundance of children.

Is he songless, sooty, uninteresting, vulgar? Not if you live on a roof. He may be all of this, a pest even, in the country. But upon my roof, for weeks at a stretch, his is the only bird voice I hear. Throughout the spring, and far into the summer, I watch the domestic affairs in the eaves-trough. During the winter, at night-fall, I see little bands and flurries of birds scudding over and dropping behind the high buildings to the east. They are sparrows on the way to their roost in the elms of an old mid-city burial-ground.

I not infrequently spy a hawk soaring calmly far away above the roof. Not only the small ones, like the sharp-shinned, but also the larger,

wilder species come, and winding up close to the clouds, circle and circle there, trying apparently to see some meaning in the maze of moving, intersecting lines of dots below yonder in the cracks of that smoking, rumbling blur.

In the spring, from the trees of the Common, which are close, but, except for the crown of one noble English elm, are shut away from me, I hear an occasional robin and Baltimore oriole. Very rarely a woodpecker will go over. The great northern shrike is a frequent winter visitor, but by ill chance I have not been up when he has called at the roof.

One of these fiend birds haunts a small court only a block away, which is inclosed in a high board fence, topped with nails. He likes the court because of these nails. They are sharp; they will stick clean through the body of a sparrow. Sometimes the fiend has a dozen sparrows run through with them, leaving the impaled bodies to flutter in the wind and finally fall away.

In sight from my roof are three tiny patches of the harbor; sometimes a fourth, when the big red-funneled liner is gone from her slip.

Down to the water of the harbor in flocks from the north come other winter visitors, the herring and black-backed gulls. Often during the winter I find them in my sky.

One day they will cross silently over the city in a long straggling line. Again they will fly low, wheeling and screaming, their wild sea-voices shrill with the sound of storm. If it is thick and gray overhead, the snow-white bodies of the herring-gulls toss in the wind above the roofs like patches of foam. I hear the sea—the wind, the surf, the wild, fierce tumult of the shore—whenever the white gulls sail screaming into my winter sky.

I have never lived under a wider reach of sky than that above my roof. It offers a clear, straight, six-minute course to the swiftest wedge of wild geese. Spring and autumn the geese and ducks go over, and their passage is the most thrilling event in all my bird calendar.

It is because the ducks fly high and silent that I see them so rarely. They are always a surprise. You look, and there against the dull sky they move, strange dark forms that set your blood leaping. But I never see a string of them

winging over that I do not think of a huge thousand-legger crawling the clouds.

My glimpses of the geese are largely chance, too. Several times, through the open window by my table, I have heard the faint, far-off honking, and have hurried to the roof in time to watch the travelers disappear. One spring day I was upon the roof when a large belated flock came over, headed north. It was the 20th of April, and the morning had broken very warm. I could see that the geese were hot and tired. They were barely clearing the church spires. On they came, their wedge wide and straggling, until almost over me, when something happened. The gander in the lead faltered and swerved, the wedge lines wavered, the flock rushed together in confusion, wheeled, dropped, then broke apart, and honking wildly, turned back toward the bay.

It was instant and complete demoralization. A stronger gander, I think, could have led the wedge unbroken over the city to some neighboring pond, where the weakest of the stragglers, however, must have fallen from sheer exhaustion.

Scaling lower and lower across the roofs, the

flock had reached the center of the city and had driven suddenly into the roar and confusion of the streets. Weary from the heat, they were dismayed at the noise, their leader faltered, and, at a stroke, the great flying wedge went to pieces.

There is nothing in the life of birds quite so stirring to the imagination as their migration: the sight of gathering swallows, the sudden appearance of strange warblers, the call of passing plovers—all are suggestive of instincts, movements, and highways that are unseen, unaccountable, and full of mystery. Little wonder that the most thrilling poem ever written to a bird begins:

Whither, midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?

The question, the mystery in that "certain flight" I never felt so vividly as from my roof. Here I have often heard the reed-birds and the water-fowl passing. Sometimes I have heard them going over in the dark. One night I re-

member particularly, the sky and the air were so clear and the geese so high in the blue.

Over the fields and wide silent marshes such passing is strange enough. But here I stood above a sleeping city of men, and far above me, so far that I could only hear them, holding their northward way through the starlit sky, they passed—whither? and how guided? Was the shining dome of the State House a beacon? Did they mark the light at Marblehead?

THE HUNTING OF THE WOODCHUCK



THE HUNTING OF THE WOODCHUCK

. . . the chylde may Rue that ys vn-born, it wos the
mor pitte.

THERE was murder in my heart. The woodchuck knew it. He never had had a thought before, but he had one now. It came hard and heavily, yet it arrived in time ; and it was not a slow thought for a woodchuck, either—just a trifle better, indeed, than my own.

This was the first time I had caught the woodchuck away from his hole. He had left his old burrow in the huckleberry hillside, and dug a new hole under one of my young peach-trees.

I had made no objection to his huckleberry hole. He used to come down the hillside and waddle into the orchard in broad day, free to do and go as he pleased ; but not since he began to dig under the peach-tree.

I discovered this new hole when it was only a foot deep, and promptly filled it with stones. The next morning the stones were out and the cavity two feet deeper. I filled it up again, driving a large squarish piece of rock into the mouth, tight, certainly stopping all further work, as I thought.

There are woodchucks that you can discourage and there are those that you can't. Three days later the piece of rock and the stones were piled about the butt of the tree and covered with fresh earth, while the hole ran in out of sight, with the woodchuck, apparently, at the bottom of it.

I had tried shutting him out, now I would try shutting him in. It was cruel—it would have been to anything but a woodchuck ; I was ashamed of myself for doing it, and went back the following day, really hoping to find the burrow open.

Never again would I worry over an imprisoned woodchuck ; but then I should never again try to destroy a woodchuck by walling up his hole, any more than Br'er Fox would try to punish the rabbit by slinging him a second time into the brier-patch.

The burrow was wide open. I had stuffed and rammed the rocks into it, and buried deep in its mouth the body of another woodchuck that my neighbor's dog had killed. All was cleared away. The deceased relative was gone—where and how I know not ; the stones were scattered on the farther side of the tree, and the passage neatly swept of all loose sand and pebbles.

Clearly the woodchuck had come to stay. I meant that he should move. I could get him into a steel trap, for his wits are not abiding ; they come only on occasion. Woodchuck lives too much in the ground and too constantly beside his own door to grow very wise. He can always be trapped. So can any one's enemy. You can always murder. But no gentleman strikes from behind. I hate the steel trap. I have set my last one. They would be bitter

peaches on that tree if they cost the woodchuck what I have seen more than one woodchuck suffer in the horrible jaws of such a trap.

But is it not perfectly legitimate and gentlemanly to shoot such a woodchuck to save one's peaches? Certainly. So I got the gun and waited—and waited—and waited. Did you ever wait with a gun until a woodchuck came out of his hole? I never did. A woodchuck has just sense enough to go into his hole—and stay in.

There were too many woodchucks about and my days were too precious for me to spend any considerable part of my summer watching with a gun for this one. Besides, I have been known to fire and miss a woodchuck, anyway.

So I gave up the gun. It was while thinking what I could do next that I came down the row of young peach-trees and spied the woodchuck out in the orchard, fifty yards away from his hole. He spied me at the same instant, and rose upon his haunches.

At last we were face to face. The time had come. It would be a fight to the finish; and a fair fight, too, for all that I had about me in the way of weapons was a pair of heavy, knee-high

hunting-boots, that I had put on against the dew of the early morning. All my thought and energy, all my hope, centered immediately in those boots.

The woodchuck kept his thoughts in his head. Into his heels he put what speed he had ; and little as that was, it counted, pieced out with the head-work.

Back in my college days I ran a two-mile race—the greatest race of the day, the judges said—and just at the tape lost two gold medals and the glory of a new intercollegiate record because I did n't use my head. Two of us out of twenty finished, and we finished together, the other fellow twisting and falling forward, breaking the string with his side, while I, pace for pace with him—did n't think.

For a moment the woodchuck and I stood motionless, he studying the situation. I was at the very mouth of his burrow. It was coming to sure death for him to attempt to get in. Yet it was sure death if he did not get in, for I should run him down.

Had you been that woodchuck, gentle reader, I wonder if you would have taken account of

the thick-strewn stones behind you, the dense tangle of dewberry-vines off on your left, the heavy boots of your enemy and his unthinking rage?

I was vastly mistaken in that woodchuck. A blanker, flabbier face never looked into mine. Only the sudden appearance of death could have brought the trace of intelligence across it that I caught as the creature dropped on all fours and began to wobble straight away from me over the area of rough, loose stones.

With a jump and a yell I was after him, making five yards to his one. He tumbled along the best he could, and, to my great surprise, directly away from his hole. It was steep downhill. I should land upon him in half a dozen bounds more.

On we went, reckless of the uneven ground, momentum increasing with every jump, until, accurately calculating his speed and the changing distance between us, I rose with a mighty leap, sailed into the air and came down—just an inch too far ahead—on a round stone, turned my ankle, and went sprawling over the woodchuck in a heap.

The woodchuck spilled himself from under me, slid short about, and tumbled off for home by way of the dewberry-patch.

He had made a good start before I was righted and again in motion. Now it was steep, very steep, uphill—which did not seem to matter much to the woodchuck, but made a great difference to me. Then, too, I had counted on a simple, straightaway dash, and had not saved myself for this lap and climbing home-stretch.

Still I was gaining,—more slowly this time,—with chances yet good of overtaking him short of the hole, when, in the thick of the dewberry-vines, I tripped, lunged forward three or four stumbling strides, and saw the woodchuck turn sharp to the right in a bee-line for his burrow.

I wheeled, jumped, cut after him, caught him on the toe of my boot, and lifting him, plopped him smoothly, softly into his hole.

It was gently done. And so beautifully! The whole feat had something of the poetic accuracy of an astronomical calculation. And the perfectly lovely dive I helped him make home!

I sat down upon his mound of earth to get myself together and to enjoy it all. What a

woodchuck ! Perhaps he never could do the trick again ; but, then, he won't need to. All the murder was gone from my heart. He had beaten the boots. He had beaten them so neatly, so absolutely, that simple decency compelled me then and there to turn over that Crawford peach-tree, root and stem, to the woodchuck, his heirs and assigns forever.

By way of celebration he has thrown out nearly a cart-load of sand from somewhere beneath the tree, deepening and enlarging his home. My Swedish neighbor, viewing the hole recently, exclaimed : "Dose vuudshuck, I t'ink him kill dem dree !" Perhaps so. As yet, however, the tree grows on without a sign of hurt.

But suppose the tree does die ? Well, there is no certainty of its bearing good fruit. There was once a peddler of trees, a pious man and a Quaker, who made a mistake, selling the wrong tree. Besides, there are other trees in the orchard ; and, if necessary, I can buy peaches.

Yes, but what if other woodchucks should seek other roof-trees in the peach row ? They won't. There are no fashions, no such emulations, out-of-doors. Because one woodchuck moves from

huckleberries to a peach-tree is no sign that all the woodchucks on the hillside are going to forsake the huckleberries with him. Only humans are silly enough for that.

If the woodchucks should come, all of them, it would be extremely interesting—an event worth many peaches.

THREE SERMONS



THREE SERMONS

I

Thou shalt not preach.

THE woods were as empty as some great empty house ; they were hollow and silent and somber. I stood looking in among the leafless trees, heavy in spirit at the quiet and gloom, when close by my side spoke a tiny voice. I started, so suddenly, so unexpectedly it broke into the wide December silence, so far it echoed through the empty forest halls.

“What !” I exclaimed, turning in my tracks

and addressing a small brown-leaved beech. "What! little Hyla, are you still out? You! with a snow-storm brewing and St. Nick due here to-morrow night?" And then from within the bush, or on it, or under it, or over it, came an answer, *Peep, peep, peep!* small and shrill, dropping into the silence of the woods and stirring it as three small pebbles might drop into the middle of a wide sleeping pond.

It was one of those gray, heavy days of the early winter—one of the vacant, spiritless days of portent that wait hushed and numb before a coming storm. Not a crow, nor a jay, nor a chickadee had heart enough to cheep. But little Hyla, the tree-frog, was nothing 'daunted. Since the last week in February, throughout the spring and the noisy summer on till this dreary time, he had been cheerfully, continuously piping. This was his last call.

Peep, peep, peep! he piped in February; *Peep, peep, peep!* in August; *Peep, peep, peep!* in December. But did he?

"He did just that," replies the scientist, "and that only."

"Not at all," I answer.

“What authority have you?” he asks. “You are not scientific. You are merely a dreaming, fooling hanger-on to the fields and woods; one of those who are forever hearing more than they hear, and seeing more than they see. We scientists hear with our ears, see with our eyes, feel with our fingers, and understand with our brains—”

“Just so, just so,” I interrupt, “and you are a worthy but often a pretty stupid set. Little Hyla in February, August, and December cries *Peep, peep, peep!* to you. But his cry to me in February is *Spring, spring, spring!* And in December—it depends; for I cannot see with my eyes alone, nor hear with my ears, nor feel with my fingers only. You can, and so could Peter Bell. To-day I saw and heard and felt the world all gray and hushed and shrouded; and little Hyla, speaking out of the silence and death, called *Cheer, cheer, cheer!*”

II

It is not because the gate is strait and the way narrow that so few get into the kingdom of

the Out-of-Doors. The gate is wide and the way is broad. The difficulty is that most persons go in too fast.

If I were asked what virtue, above all others, one must possess in order to be shown the mysteries of the kingdom of earth and sky, I should say, there are several; I should not know which to name first. There are, however, two virtues very essential and very hard to acquire, namely, the ability to keep quiet and to stand still.

Last summer a fox in two days took fifteen of my chickens. I saw the rascal in broad day come down the hill to the chicken-yard. I greatly enjoy the sight of a wild fox; but fifteen chickens a sight was too high a price. So I got the gun and chased about the woods half the summer for another glimpse of the sinner's red hide. I saw him one Sunday as we were driving into the wood road from church; but never a week-day sight for all my chasing.

Along in the early autumn I got home one evening shortly after sundown. I had left several cocks of hay spread out in the little meadow, and though it was already pretty damp, I took the fork, went down, and cocked it up.

Returning, I climbed by the narrow, winding path through the pines, out into the corner of my pasture. It was a bright moonlight night, and leaning back upon the short-handled fork, I stopped in the shadow of the pines to look out over the softly lighted field.

Off in the woods a mile away sounded the deep, mellow tones of two foxhounds. Day and night all summer long I had heard them, and all summer long I had hurried to this knoll and to that for a shot. But the fox always took the other knoll.

The echoing cries of the dogs through the silent woods were musical. Soon they sounded sharp and clear—the hounds were crossing an open stretch leading down to the meadow behind me. As I leaned, listening, I heard near by a low, uneasy murmuring from a covey of quails sleeping in the brush beside the path, and before I had time to think what it meant, a fox trotted up the path I had just climbed, and halted in the edge of the shadows directly at my feet.

I stood as stiff as a post. He sniffed at my dew-wet boots, backed away, and looked me over

curiously. I could have touched him with my fork. Then he sat down with just his silver-tipped brush in the silver moonlight, to study me in earnest.

The loud baying of the hounds was coming nearer. How often I had heard it, and, in spite of my lost chickens, how often I had exclaimed, "Poor little tired fox!" But here sat "poor little tired fox" with his tongue in his head, calmly wondering what kind of stump he had run up against this time.

I could only dimly see his eyes, but his whole body said: "I can't make it out, for it does n't move. But so long as it does n't move I sha'n't be scared." Then he trotted to this side and to that for a better wind, somewhat afraid, but much more curious.

His time was up, however. The dogs were yelping across the meadow on his warm trail. Giving me a last unsatisfied look, he dropped down the path, directly toward the dogs, and sprang lightly off into the thicket.

The din of their own voices must have deafened the dogs, or they would have heard him. Round and round they circled, giving the fox

ample time for the study of another "stump" before they discovered that he had doubled down the path, and still longer time before they crossed the wide scentless space of his side jump and once more fastened upon his trail.

III

BACK in my knickerbocker days I once went off on a Sunday-school picnic, and soon, replete with "copenhagen," I sauntered into the woods alone in quest of less cloying sport. I had not gone far when I picked up a dainty little ribbon-snake, and having no bag or box along, I rolled him up in my handkerchief, and journeyed on with the wiggling reptile safely caged on top of my head under my tight-fitting hat.

After a time I began to feel a peculiar movement under the hat, not exactly the crawling of a normal snake, but more like that of a snake with legs. Those were the days when all my soul was bent on the discovery of a new species—of anything; when the whole of life meant a journey to the Academy of Natural Sciences with something to be named. For just an in-

stant flashed the hope that I had found an uncursed snake, one of the original ones that went on legs. I reached for the hat, bent over, and pulled it off, and, lo ! not a walking snake. Just an ordinary snake, but with it a live wood-frog !

This, at least, was interesting, the only real piece of magic I have ever done. Into my hat had gone only a live snake, now I brought forth the snake and a live frog. This was a snake to conjure with ; so I tied him up again and finally got him home.

The next Sunday the minister preached a temperance sermon, in which he said some dreadful things about snakes. The creatures do seem in some dark, horrible way to lurk in the dregs of strong drink : but the minister was not discriminating ; he was too fierce and sweeping, saying, among other things, that there was a universal human hatred for snakes, and that one of the chief purposes of the human heel was to bruise their scaly heads.

I was not born of my Quaker mother to share this "universal human hatred for snakes" ; but I did get from her a wild dislike for sweeping,

general statements. After the sermon I ventured to tell the preacher that there was an exception to this "universal" rule; that all snakes were not adders and serpents, but some were just innocent snakes, and that I had a collection of tame ones which I wished he would come out to see.

He looked astonished, skeptical, then pained. It was during the days, I think, of my "probation," and into his anxious heart had come the thought, Was I "running well"? But he dismissed the doubt and promised to walk over in the morning.

His interest amazed me. But, then, preachers quite commonly are different on Monday. As we went from cage to cage, he said he had read how boa-constrictors eat, and would n't I show him how these snakes eat?

We had come to the cage of the little ribbon-snake from the picnic grove, and had arrived just in time to catch him crawling away out of a hole that he had worked in the rusty mosquito-netting wire of the cover. I caught him, put him back, and placed a brickbat over the hole.

I knew that this snake was hungry, because

he had had nothing to eat for nearly a week, and the frog which appeared so mysteriously with him in my hat was the dinner that he had given up that day of his capture in his effort to escape.

The minister looked on without a tremor. I took off the brick that he might see the better. The snake was very long and small around and the toad, which I had given him, was very short and big around, so that when it was all over there was a bunch in the middle of the snake comparable to the lump a prime watermelon would make in the middle of a small boy if swallowed whole.

While we were still watching, the snake, having comfortably (for a snake) breakfasted, saw the hole uncovered and stuck out his head. We made no move. Slowly, cautiously, with his eye upon us, he glided out, up to the big bunch of breakfast in his middle. This stuck. Frantically he squirmed, whirled, and lashed about, but in vain. He could not pull through. He had eaten too much.

There was just one thing for him to do if he would be free: give up the breakfast of toad

(which is much better fare according to snake standards than pottage according to ours), as he had given up the dinner of frog. Would he sell his birthright?

Perhaps a snake cannot calculate ; perhaps he knows no conflict of emotions. Yet something very like these processes seemed to go on within the scaly little reptile. He ceased all violent struggle, laid his length upon the netting, and *seemed* to think, to weigh the chances, to count the cost.

Soon he softly drew back into the cage. A series of severe contortions followed ; the obstructing bunch began to move forward, up, farther and farther, until at last, dazed, squeezed, and half smothered, but entirely alive and unhurt, the toad appeared and once more opened his eyes to the blessed light.

The snake quickly put his head through the hole, slipped out again, and glided away into his freedom. He had earned it. The toad deserved his liberty too, and I took him into the strawberry-patch.

The minister looked on at it all. Perhaps he did n't learn anything. But I did.

THE MARSH



THE MARSH

And breathe it free, and breathe it free,
By rangy marsh, in lone sea-liberty.

I

IT was a late June day whose breaking found me upon the edge of the great salt-marshes which lie behind East Point Light, as the Delaware Bay lies in front of it, and which run in a wide, half-land, half-bay border down the cape.

I followed along the black sandy road which goes to the Light until close to the old Zane's Place,—the last farm-house of the uplands,—when I turned off into the marsh toward the river. The mosquitos rose from the damp grass at every step, swarming up around me in a cloud, and streaming off behind like a comet's tail, which hummed instead of glowed. I was the only male among them. It was a cloud of females, the nymphs of the salt-marsh; and all through that day the singing, stinging, smothering swarm danced about me, rested upon me, covered me whenever I paused, so that my black leggings turned instantly to a mosquito brown, and all my dress seemed dyed alike.

Only I did not pause—not often, nor long. The sun came up blisteringly hot, yet on I walked, and wore my coat, my hands deep down in the pockets and my head in a handkerchief. At noon I was still walking, and kept on walking till I reached the bay shore, when a breeze came up, and drove the singing, stinging fairies back into the grass, and saved me.

I left the road at a point where a low bank started across the marsh like a long protecting

arm reaching out around the hay-meadows, dragging them away from the grasping river, and gathering them out of the vast undrained tract of coarse sedges, to hold them to the upland. Passing along the bank until beyond the weeds and scrub of the higher borders, I stood with the sky-bound, bay-bound green beneath my feet. Far across, with sails gleaming white against the sea of sedge, was a schooner, beating slowly up the river. Laying my course by her, I began to beat slowly out into the marsh through the heavy sea of low, matted hay-grass.

There is no fresh-water meadow, no inland plain, no prairie with this rainy, misty, early morning freshness so constant on the marsh ; no other reach of green so green, so a-glitter with seas of briny dew, so regularly, unfailingly fed :

Look how the grace of the sea doth go
About and about through the intricate channels
that flow

Here and there,
Everywhere,

Till his waters have flooded the uttermost creeks
and the low-lying lanes,
And the marsh is meshed with a million veins !

I imagine a Western wheat-field, half-way to head, could look, in the dew of morning, somewhat like a salt-marsh. It certainly would have at times the purple-distance haze, that atmosphere of the sea which hangs across the marsh. The two might resemble each other as two pictures of the same theme, upon the same scale, one framed and hung, the other not. It is the framing, the setting of the marsh that gives it character, variety, tone, and its touch of mystery.

For the marsh reaches back to the higher lands of fences, fields of corn, and ragged forest blurs against the hazy horizon ; it reaches down to the river of the reedy flats, coiled like a serpent through the green ; it reaches away to the sky where the clouds anchor, where the moon rises, where the stars, like far-off lighthouses, gleam along the edge ; and it reaches out to the bay, and on, beyond the white surf-line of meeting, on, beyond the line where the bay's blue and the sky's blue touch, on, far on.

Here meet land and river, sky and sea ; here they mingle and make the marsh.

A prairie rolls and billows ; the marsh lies

still, lies as even as a sleeping sea. Yet what moods ! What changes ! What constant variety of detail everywhere ! In The Marshes of Glynn there was

A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad
in the blade,
Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light
or a shade,

but not in these Maurice River marshes. Here, to-day, the sun was blazing, kindling millions of tiny suns in the salt-wet blades ; and instead of waist-high grass, there lay around me acres and acres of the fine rich hay-grass, full-grown, but without a blade wider than a knitting-needle or taller than my knee. It covered the marsh like a deep, thick fur, like a wonderland carpet into whose elastic, velvety pile my feet sank and sank, never quite feeling the floor. Here and there were patches of higher sedges, green, but of differing shades, which seemed spread upon the grass carpet like long-napped rugs.

Ahead of me the even green broke suddenly over a shoal of sand into tall, tufted grasses, into rose, mallow, and stunted persimmon bushes,

foaming, on nearer view, with spreading dogbane blossoms. Off toward the bay another of these shoals, mole-hill high in the distance, ran across the marsh for half a mile, bearing a single broken file of trees—sentinels they seemed, some of them fallen, others gaunt and wind-beaten, watching against the sea.

These were the lookouts and the resting-places for passing birds. During the day, whenever I turned in their direction, a crow, a hawk, or some smaller bird was seen upon their dead branches.

Naturally the variety of bird life upon the marsh is limited; but there is by no means the scarcity here which is so often noted in the forests and wild prairies of corresponding extent. Indeed, the marsh was birdy—rich in numbers if not in species. Underfoot, in spots, sang the marsh-wrens; in larger patches the sharp-tailed sparrows; and almost as wide-spread and constant as the green was the singing of the seaside sparrows. Overhead the fish-hawks crossed frequently to their castle nest high on the top of a tall white oak along the land edge of the marsh; in the neighborhood of the sentinel trees a pair of

crows were busy trying (it seemed to me) to find an oyster, a crab—something big enough to choke, for just one minute, the gobbling, gulping clamor of their infant brood. But the dear devouring monsters could not be choked, though once or twice I thought by their strangling cries that father crow, in sheer desperation, had brought them oysters with the shells on. Their awful gaggings died away at dusk. Besides the crows and fish-hawks, a harrier would now and then come skimming close along the grass. Higher up, the turkey-buzzards circled all day long; and once, setting my blood leaping and the fish-hawks screaming, there sailed over, far away in the blue, a bald-headed eagle, his snowy neck and tail flashing in the sunlight as he careened among the clouds.

In its blended greens the marsh that morning offered one of the most satisfying drinks of color my eyes ever tasted. The areas of different grasses were often acres in extent, so that the tints, shading from the lightest pea-green of the thinner sedges to the blue-green of the rushes, to the deep emerald-green of the hay-grass, merged across their broad bands into perfect harmony.

As fresh and vital as the color was the breath of the marsh. There is no bank of violets stealing and giving half so sweet an odor to my nostrils, outraged by a winter of city smells, as the salty, spray-laden breath of the marsh. It seems fairly to line the lungs with ozone. I know how grass-fed cattle feel at the smell of salt. I have the concentrated thirst of a whole herd when I catch that first whiff of the marshes after a winter, a year it may be, of unsalted inland air. The smell of it stampedes me. I gallop to meet it, and drink, drink, drink deep of it, my blood running redder with every draught.

II

I HAD waded out into the meadow perhaps two hundred yards, leaving a dark bruised trail in the grass, when I came upon a nest of the long-billed marsh-wren. It was a bulky house, and so overburdened its frail sedge supports that it lay almost upon the ground, with its little round doorway wide open to the sun and rain. They must have been a young couple who built it, and quite inexperienced. I wonder they had

not abandoned it ; for a crack of light into a wren's nest would certainly addle the eggs. They are such tiny, dusky, tucked-away things, and their cradle is so deep and dark and hidden. There were no fatalities, I am sure, following my efforts to prop the leaning structure, though the wrens were just as sure that it was all a fatality—utterly misjudging my motives. As a rule, I have never been able to help much in such extremities. Either I arrive too late, or else I blunder.

I thought, for a moment, that it was the nest of the long-billed's cousin, the short-billed marsh-wren, that I had found—which would have been a gem indeed, with pearly eggs instead of chocolate ones. Though I was out for the mere joy of being out, I had really come with a hope of discovering this mousy mite of a wren, and of watching her ways. It was like hoping to watch the ways of the “wunk.” Several times I have been near these little wrens ; but what chance has a pair of human eyes with a skulking four inches of brownish streaks and bars in the middle of a marsh ! Such birds are the everlasting despair of the naturalist, the salt of his earth.

The belief that a pair of them dwelt somewhere in this green expanse, that I might at any step come upon them, made me often forget the mosquitos.

When I reached the ridge of rose and mallow bushes, two wrens began muttering in the grass with different notes and tones from those of the long-billed. I advanced cautiously. Soon one flashed out and whipped back among the thick stems again, exposing himself just long enough to show me *stellaris*, the little short-billed wren I was hunting.

I tried to stand still for a second glimpse and a clue to the nest ; but the mosquitos ! Things have come to a bad pass with the bird-hunter, whose only gun is an opera-glass, when he cannot stand stock-still for an hour. His success depends upon his ability to take root. He needs light feet, a divining mind, and many other things, but most of all he needs patience. There are few mortals, however, with mosquito-proof patience—one that would stand the test here. Remembering a meadow in New England where *stellaris* nested, I concluded to wait till chance took me thither, and passed on.

This ridge of higher ground proved to be a mosquito roost—a thousand here to one in the deeper, denser grass. As I hurried across I noted with great satisfaction that the pink-white blossoms of the spreading dogbane were covered with mosquito carcasses. It lessened my joy somewhat to find, upon examination, that all the victims were males. Either they had drunk poison from the flowers, or else, and more likely, they had been unable to free their long-haired antennæ from the sticky honey into which they had dipped their innocent beaks. Several single flowers had trapped three, and from one blossom I picked out five. If we could bring the dogbane to brew a cup which would be fatal to the females, it might be a good plant to raise in our gardens along with the eucalyptus and the castor-oil plants.

Everywhere as I went along, from every stake, every stout weed and topping bunch of grass, trilled the seaside sparrows—a weak, husky, monotonous song, of five or six notes, a little like the chippy's, more tuneful, perhaps, but not so strong. They are dark, dusky birds, of a grayish olive-green hue, with a conspicuous

yellow line before the eye, and yellow upon the shoulder.

There seems to be a sparrow of some kind for every variety of land between the poles. Mountain-tops, seaside marshes, inland prairies, swamps, woods, pastures—everywhere, from Indian River to the Yukon, a sparrow nests. Yet one can hardly associate sparrows with marshes, for they seem out of place in houseless, treeless, half-submerged stretches. These are the haunts of the shy, more secretive birds. Here the ducks, rails, bitterns, coots,—birds that can wade and swim, eat frogs and crabs,—seem naturally at home. The sparrows are perchers, grain-eaters, free-fliers, and singers; and they, of all birds, are the friends and neighbors of man. This is no place for them. The effect of this marsh life upon the flight and song of these two species was very marked. Both showed unmistakable vocal powers which long ago would have been developed under the stimulus of human listeners; and during all my stay (so long have they crept and skulked about through the low marsh paths) I did not see one rise a hundred feet into the air, nor fly straight away for a

hundred yards. They would get up just above the grass, and flutter and drop—a puttering, short-winded, apoplectic struggle, very unbecoming and unworthy.

By noon I had completed a circle and recrossed the lighthouse road in the direction of the bay. A thin sheet of lukewarm water lay over all this section. The high spring tides had been reinforced by unusually heavy rains during April and May, giving a great area of pasture and hay land back, for that season, to the sea. Descending a copsy dune from the road, I surprised a brood of young killdeers feeding along the drift at the edge of the wet meadow. They ran away screaming, leaving behind a pair of spotted sandpipers, “till-tops,” that had been wading with them in the shallow water. The sandpipers teetered on for a few steps, then rose at my approach, scaled nervously out over the drowned grass, and, circling, alighted near where they had taken wing, continuing instantly with their hunt, and calling *Tweet-tweet, tweet-tweet*, and teetering, always teetering, as they tiptoed along.

If perpetual motion is still a dream of the

physicist, he might get an idea by carefully examining the way the body of till-top is balanced on its needle legs. If till-tops have not been tilting forever, and shall not go on tilting forever, it is because something is wrong with the mechanism of the world outside their little spotted bodies. Surely the easiest, least willed motion in all the universe is this sandpiper's teeter, teeter, teeter, as it hurries peering and prying along the shore.

Killdeers and sandpipers are noisy birds ; and one would know, after half a day upon the marsh, even if he had never seen these birds before, that they could not have been bred here. For however

candid and simple and nothing-withholding and
free

the marsh may seem to one coming suddenly from the wooded uplands, it will not let one enter far without the consciousness that silence and secrecy lie deeper here than in the depths of the forest glooms. The true birds of the marsh, those that feed and nest in the grass, have the spirit of the great marsh-mother.

The sandpiper is not her bird. It belongs to the shore, living almost exclusively along sandy, pebbly margins, the margins of any, of almost every water, from Delaware Bay to the tiny bubbling spring in some Minnesota pasture. Neither is the killdeer her bird. The upland claims it, plover though it be. A barren, stony hillside, or even a last year's corn-field left fallow, is a better-loved breast to the killdeer than the soft brooding breast of the marsh. There are no grass-birds so noisy as these two. Both of them lay their eggs in pebble nests ; and both depend largely for protection upon the harmony of their colors with the general tone of their surroundings.

I was still within sound of the bleating kill-deers when a rather large, greenish-gray bird flapped heavily but noiselessly from a muddy spot in the grass to the top of a stake and faced me. Here was a child of the marsh. Its bolt-upright attitude spoke the watcher in the grass ; then as it stretched its neck toward me, bringing its body parallel to the ground, how the shape of the skulker showed ! This bird was not built to fly nor to perch, but to tread the low, narrow

paths of the marsh jungle, silent, swift, and elusive as a shadow.

It was the clapper-rail, the "marsh-hen." One never finds such a combination of long legs, long toes, long neck and bill, with this long but heavy hen-like body, outside the meadows and marshes. The grass ought to have been alive with the birds: it was breeding-time. But I think the high tides must have delayed them or driven them elsewhere, for I did not find an egg, nor hear at nightfall their colony-cry, so common at dusk and dawn in the marshes just across on the coast about Townsend's Inlet. There at sunset in nesting-time one of the rails will begin to call—a loud, clapping roll; a neighbor takes it up, then another and another, the circle of cries widening and swelling until the whole marsh is a-clatter.

Heading my way with a slow, labored stroke came one of the fish-hawks. She was low down and some distance away, so that I got behind a post before she saw me. The marsh-hen spied her first, and dropped into the grass. On she came, her white breast and belly glistening, and in her talons a big glistening fish. It was a

magnificent catch. "Bravo!" I should have shouted—rather I should n't; but here she was right over me, and the instinct of the boy, of the savage, had me before I knew, and leaping out, I whirled my cap and yelled to wake the marsh. The startled hawk jerked, keeled, lifted with a violent struggle, and let go her hold. Down fell the writhing, twisting fish at my feet. It was a splendid striped bass, weighing at least four pounds, and still live enough to flop.

I felt mean as I picked up the useless thing and looked far away to the great nest with its hungry young. I was no better than the bald eagle, the lazy robber-baron, who had stolen the dinner of these same young hawks the day before.

Their mother had been fishing up the river and had caught a tremendous eel. An eel can hold out to wriggle a very long time. He has no vitals. Even with talon-tipped claws he is slippery and more than a clawful; so the old hawk took a short cut home across the railroad-track and the corner of the woods where stands the eagle tree.

She could barely clear the tree-tops, and, with the squirming of the eel about her legs, had

apparently forgotten that the eagle lived along this road, or else in her struggle to get the prize home she was risking the old dragon's being away. He was not away. I have no doubt that he had been watching her all the time from some high perch, and just as she reached the open of the railroad-track, where the booty would not fall among the trees, he appeared. His first call, mocking, threatening, commanding, shot the poor hawk through with terror. She screamed; she tried to rise and escape; but without a second's parley the great king drove down upon her. She dropped the fish, dived, and dodged the blow, and the robber, with a rushing swoop that was glorious in its sweep, in its speed and ease, caught the eel within a wing's reach of me and the track.

I did not know what to do with my spoil. Somewhat relieved, upon looking around, to find that even the marsh-hen had not been an eye-witness to my knightly deed, I started with the fish and my conscience toward the distant nest, determined to climb into it and leave the catch with the helpless, dinnerless things for whom it was intended.

I am still carrying that fish. How seldom we are able to restore the bare exaction, to say nothing of the fourfold ! My tree was harder to climb than Zacchæus's. Mine was an ancient white oak, with the nest set directly upon its dead top. I had stood within this very nest twelve years before ; but even with the help of my conscience I could not get into it now. Not that I had grown older or larger. Twelve years do not count unless they carry one past forty. It was the nest that had grown. Gazing up at it, I readily believed the old farmer in the Zane's house who said it would take a pair of mules to haul it. He thought it larger than one that blew down in the marsh the previous winter, which made three cart-loads.

One thinks of Stirling and of the castles frowning down upon the Rhine as he comes out of the wide, flat marsh beneath this great nest, crowning this loftiest eminence in all the region. But no château of the Alps, no beetling crag-lodged castle of the Rhine, can match the fish-hawk's nest for sheer boldness and daring. Only the eagles' nests upon the fierce dizzy pinnacles in the Yosemite surpass the home of the fish-hawk

in unawed boldness. The aery of the Yosemite eagle is 'the most sublimely defiant of things built by bird, or beast, or man.

A fish-hawk will make its nest upon the ground, or a hummock, a stump, a buoy, a chimney—upon anything near the water that offers an adequate platform; but its choice is the dead top of some lofty tree where the pathway for its wide wings is open and the vision range is free for miles around.

How dare the bird rear such a pile upon so slight and towering a support! How dare she defy the winds, which, loosened far out on the bay, come driving across the cowering, unresisting marsh! She is too bold sometimes. I have known more than one nest to fall in a wild May gale. Many a nest, built higher and wider year after year, while all the time its dead support has been rotting and weakening, gets heavy with the wet of winter, and some night, under the weight of an ice-storm, comes crashing to the earth.

Yet twelve years had gone since I scaled the walls and stood within this nest; and with patience and hardihood enough I could have done

it again this time, no doubt. I remember one nest along Maurice River, perched so high above the gums of the swamp as to be visible from my home across a mile of trees, that has stood a landmark for the oystermen this score of years.

The sensations of my climb into this fish-hawk's nest of the marsh are vivid even now. Going up was comparatively easy. When I reached the forks holding the nest, I found I was under a bulk of sticks and corn-stalks which was about the size of an ordinary haycock or an unusually large wash-tub. By pulling out, pushing aside, and breaking off the sticks, I worked a precarious way through the four feet or more of debris and scrambled over the edge. There were two eggs. Taking them in my hands, so as not to crush them, I rose carefully to my feet.

Upright in a hawk's nest ! Sixty feet in the air, on the top of a gaunt old white oak, high above the highest leaf, with the screaming hawks about my head, with marsh and river and bay lying far around ! It was a moment of exultation ; and the thrill of it has been transmitted through the years. My body has been drawn to higher places since ; but my soul has

never quite touched that altitude again, for I was a boy then.

Nor has it ever shot swifter, deeper into the abyss of mortal terror than followed with my turning to descend. I looked down into empty air. Feet foremost I backed over the rim, clutching the loose sticks and feeling for a foothold. They snapped with the least pressure ; slipped and fell if I pushed them, or stuck out into my clothing. Suddenly the sticks in my hands pulled out, my feet broke through under me, and for an instant I hung at the side of the nest in the air, impaled on a stub that caught my blouse as I slipped.

There is a special Providence busy with the boy.

This huge nest of the fish-hawks was more than a nest ; it was a castle in very truth, in the sheltering crevices of whose uneven walls a small community of purple grackles lived. Wedged in among the protruding sticks was nest above nest, plastering the great pile over, making it almost grassy with their loose flying ends. I remember that I counted more than twenty of these crow-blacks' nests the time I climbed the

tree, and that I destroyed several in breaking my way up the face of the structure.

Do the blackbirds nest here for the protection afforded by the presence of the hawks? Do they come for the crumbs which fall from these great people's table? Or is it the excellent opportunity for social life offered by this convenient apartment-house that attracts?

The purple grackles are a garrulous, gossipy set, as every one knows. They are able-bodied, not particularly fond of fish, and inclined to seek the neighborhood of man, rather than to come out here away from him. They make very good American rooks. So I am led to think it is their love of "neighboring" that brings them about the hawk's nest. If this surmise is correct, then the presence of two families of English sparrows among them might account for there being only eight nests now, where a decade ago there were twenty.

I was amused—no longer amazed—at finding the sparrows here. The seed of these birds shall possess the earth. Is there even now a spot into which the bumptious, mannerless, ubiquitous little pleb has not pushed himself? If you look

for him in the rain-pipes of the Fifth Avenue mansions, he is there ; if you search for him in the middle of the wide, silent salt-marsh, he is there ; if you take—but it is vain to take the wings of the morning, or of anything else, in the hope of flying to a spot where the stumpy little wings of the English sparrow have not already carried him.

There is something really admirable in the unqualified sense of ownership, the absolute want of diffidence, the abiding self-possession and coolness of these birds. One cannot measure it in the city streets, where everybody jostles and stares. It can be appreciated only in the marsh : here in the silence, the secrecy, the withdrawing, where even the formidable-looking fiddler-crabs shy and sidle into their holes as you pass ; here, where the sparrows may perch upon the rim of a great hawk's nest, twist their necks, ogle you out of countenance, and demand what business brought you to the marsh.

I hunted round for a stone when one of them buttonholed me. He was n't insolent, but he was impertinent. The two hawks and the blackbirds flew off as I came up ; but the sparrows

stayed. They were the only ones in possession as I moved away ; and they will be the only ones in possession when I return. If that is next summer, then I shall find a colony of twenty sparrow families around the hawk's nest. The purple grackles will be gone. And the fish-hawks? Only the question of another year or so when they, too, shall be dispossessed and gone. But where will they go to escape the sparrows?

III

FROM a mile away I turned to look back at the "cripple" where towered the tall white oak of the hawks. Both birds were wheeling about the castle nest, their noble flight full of the freedom of the marsh, their piercing cries voicing its wildness. And how free, how wild, how untouched by human hands the wide plain seemed ! Sea-like it lay about me, circled southward from east to west with the rim of the sky.

I moved on toward the bay. The sun had dropped to the edge of the marsh, its level-lined shafts splintering into golden fire against the curtained windows of the lighthouse. It would

soon be sunset. For some time there had been a quiet gurgling and lipping down in the grass, but it had meant nothing, until, of a sudden, I heard the rush of a wave along the beach: the tide was coming in. And with it came a breeze, a moving, briny, bay-cooled breeze that stirred the grass with a whisper of night.

Once more I had worked round to the road. It ran on ahead of me, up a bushy dune, and forked, one branch leading off to the lighthouse, the other straight out to the beach, out against the white of the breaking waves.

The evening purple was deepening on the bay when I mounted the dune. Bands of pink and crimson clouded the west, a thin cold wash of blue veiled the east; and overhead, bayward, landward, everywhere, the misting and the shadowing of the twilight.

Between me and the white wave-bars at the end of the road gleamed a patch of silvery water—the returning tide. As I watched, a silvery streamlet broke away and came running down the wheel track. Another streamlet, lagging a little, ran shining down the other track, stopped, rose, and creeping slowly to the middle

of the road, spread into a second gleaming patch. They grew, met—and the road for a hundred feet was covered with the bay.

As the crimson paled into smoky pearl, the blue changed green and gold, and big at the edge of the marsh showed the rim of the moon.

Weird hour! Sunset, moonrise, flood-tide, and twilight together weaving the spell of the night over the wide waking marsh. Mysterious, sinister almost, seemed the swift, stealthy creeping of the tide. It was surrounding and crawling in upon me. Already it stood ankle-deep in the road, and was reaching toward my knees, a warm thing, quick and moving. It slipped among the grasses and into the holes of the crabs with a smothered bubbling; it disturbed the seaside sparrows sleeping down in the sedge and kept them springing up to find new beds. How high would it rise? Behind me on the road it had crawled to the foot of the dune. Would it let me through to the mainland if I waited for the flood?

It would be high tide at nine o'clock. Finding a mound of sand on the shore that the water could hardly cover, I sat down to watch the tide-

miracle ; for here, surely, I should see the wonder worked, so wide was the open, so full, so frank the moon.

In the yellow light I could make out the line of sentinel trees across the marsh, and off on the bay a ship, looming dim in the distance, coming on with wind and tide. There were no sounds except the long regular wash of the waves, the stir of the breeze in the chafing sedges, and the creepy stepping of the water weaving everywhere through the hidden paths of the grass. Presently a night-hawk began to flit about me, then another and another, skimming just above the marsh as silent as the shadows. What was that? Something moved across the moon. In a moment, bat-like and huge against the great yellow disk, appeared a marsh-owl. He was coming to look at me. What was I that dared remain abroad in the marsh after the rising of the moon? that dared invade this eery realm, this night-spread, tide-crept, half-sealand where he was king? How like a goblin he seemed ! I thought of Grendel, and listened for the splash of the fen-monster's steps along the edge of the bay. But only the owl came. Down, down,

down he bobbed, till I could almost feel the fanning of his wings. How silent ! His long legs hung limp, his body dangled between those soft wide wings within reach of my face. Yet I heard no sound. Mysterious creature ! I was glad when he ceased his ghostly dance about me and made off.

It was nine o'clock. The waves had ceased to wash against the sand, for the beach was gone ; the breeze had died away ; the stir of the water in the grass was still. Only a ripple broke now and then against my little island. The bay and the marsh were one.

How still the plains of the waters be !
The tide is in his ecstasy.
The tide is at his highest height :
And it is night.

CALICO AND THE KITTENS



CALICO AND THE KITTENS

ONE spring day I found myself the sole help of two blind, naked infants—as near a real predicament as a man could well get. What did it matter that they had long tails and were squirrels? They were infants just the same; and any kind of an infant on the hands of any mere man is a real tragedy.

As I looked at the two callow things in the grass, a dismay and weak helplessness quite overcame me. The way they squirmed and shivered and squeaked worked upon me down even to my knees. I felt sick and foolish.

Both of their parents were dead. Their loose leaf-nest overhead had been riddled with shot. I had climbed up and found them ; I had brought them down ; I must—feed them ! The other way of escape were heathen.

But how could I feed them ? Nipples, quills, spoons—none of them would fit these mites of mouths. What a miserable mother I was ! How poorly equipped for foundlings ! They were dying for lack of food ; and as they pawed about and whimpered in my hands I devoutly wished the shot had put them all out of misery together. I was tempted to turn heathen and despatch them.

Unhappy but resolute, I started homeward, determined to rear those squirrels, if it could be done. On my way I remembered—and it came to me with a shock—that one of my neighbor's cats had a new batch of kittens. They were only a few days old. Might not Calico, their mother, be induced to adopt the squirrels ?

Nothing could be more absurd. The kittens were three times larger than the squirrels. Even had they been the same size, did I think the old three-colored cat could be fooled ? that

she might not know a kitten of hers from some other mother's—squirrel? I was desperate indeed. Calico was a hunter. She had eaten more gray squirrels, perhaps, than I had ever seen. She would think I had been foraging for her—the mother of seven green kittens!—and would take my charges as titbits. Still I was determined to try.

My neighbor's kittens were enough and to spare. One of Calico's last year's lot still waited a good home; and here were seven more to be cared for. Might not two of these be spirited away, far away; the two squirrels substituted, and the old cat be none the wiser?

I went home by way of my neighbor's, and found Calico in the basement curled up asleep with her babies. She roused and purred questioningly as we bent over the basket, and watched with concern, but with no anxiety, as two of her seven were lifted out and put inside a hat upon a table. She was perfectly used to having her kittens handled. True, strange things had happened to them. But that was long ago; and there had been so very many kittens that no one mother could remember

about them all. She trusted us—with an ear pricked and eyes watchful. But they were safe, and in a prideful, self-conscious, young-mother way she began to wash the five.

Some one stood between her and the hat when the kittens were lifted out and the squirrels were put in their place. Calico did not see. For a time she thought no more about them; she was busy washing and showing the others. By and by it began to look as though she had forgotten that there were more than five. She could not count. But most mothers can *number* their children, even if they cannot count, and soon Calico began to fidget, looking up at the hat which the hungry, motherless squirrels kept rocking. Then she leaped out upon the floor, purring, and bounded upon the table, going straight to the young squirrels.

There certainly was an expression of surprise and mystification on her face as she saw the change that had come over those kittens. They had shrunk and faded from two or three bright colors to a single pale pink. She looked again and sniffed them. Their odor had changed, too. She turned to the watchers about the table, but

they said nothing. She hardly knew what to think. She was half inclined to leave them and go back to the basket, when one of the squirrels whimpered—a genuine, universal baby whimper. That settled it. She was a mother, and whatever else these things in the hat might be, they were babies. That was enough, especially as she needed just this much baby here in the hat to make good what was lacking in the basket.

With a soft, caressing purr she stepped gently into the hat, took one of the squirrels by the neck, brought it to the edge of the table, and laid it down for a firmer hold; then sprang lightly to the floor. Over to the basket she walked and dropped it tenderly among her other babies. Then, having brought the remaining one and deposited that with the same mother-care, she got into the basket herself and curled down contentedly—her heart all whole.

And this is how strange a thing mother-love is! The performance was scarcely believable. Could she be so love-blind as not to see what they were and not eat them? But when she began to lick the little interlopers and cuddle them down to their dinner as if they were her

own genuine kittens, there could be no more doubt or fear.

The squirrels do not know to this day that Calico is not their real mother. From the first they took her mother's milk and mother's love as rightfully and thanklessly as the kittens, growing, not like the kittens at all, but into the most normal of squirrels, round and fat and splendid-tailed.

Calico clearly recognized some difference between the two kinds of kittens, but *what* difference always puzzled her. She would clean up a kitten and comb it slick, then turn to one of the squirrels and wash it, but rarely, if ever, completing the work because of some disconcerting un-catlike antic. As the squirrels grew older they also grew friskier, and soon took the washing as the signal for a frolic. As well try to wash a bubble. They were bundles of live springs, twisting out of her paws, dancing over her back, leaping, kicking, tumbling as she had never seen a kitten do in all her richly kittened experience.

I don't know why, but Calico was certainly fonder of these two freaks than of her own normal children. Long after the latter were

weaned she nursed and mothered the squirrels. I have frequently seen them let into the kitchen when the old cat was there, and the moment they got through the door they would rush toward her, dropping chestnuts or cookies by the way. She in turn would hurry to meet them with a little purr of greeting full of joy and affection. They were shamefully big for such doings. The kittens had quit it long ago. Calico herself, after a while, came to feel the impropriety of mothering these strapping young ones, and in a weak, indulgent way tried to stop it. But the squirrels were persistent and would not go about their business at all with an ordinary cuff. She would put them off, run away from them, slap them, and make believe to bite ; but not until she did bite, and sharply too, would they be off.

All this seemed very strange and unnatural ; yet a stranger thing happened one day, when Calico brought in to her family a full-grown gray squirrel which she had caught in the woods. She laid it down on the floor and called the kittens and squirrels to gather around. They came, and as the squirrels sniffed at the dead one on the floor there was hardly a mark of differ-

ence in their appearance. It might have been one of Calico's own nursing that lay there dead, so far as any one save Calico could see. And with her the difference, I think, was more of smell than of sight. But she knew her own ; and though she often found her two out among the trees of the yard, she never was mistaken, nor for an instant made as if to hurt them.

Yet they could not have been more entirely squirrel had their own squirrel mother nurtured them. Calico's milk and love went all to cat in her own kittens, and all to squirrel in these that she adopted. No single hair of theirs turned from its squirrel-gray to any one of Calico's three colors ; no single squirrel trait became the least bit catlike.

Indeed, as soon as the squirrels could run about they forsook the clumsy-footed kittens under the stove and scampered up back of the hot-water tank, where they built a nest. Whenever Calico entered the kitchen purring, out would pop their heads, and down they would come, understanding the mother language as well as the kittens, and usually beating the kittens to the mother's side.

So far from teaching them to climb and build nests behind water-tanks, their foster-mother never got over her astonishment at it. All they needed from her, all they needed and would have received from their own squirrel mother, was nourishment and protection until their teeth and legs grew strong. Wits were born with them ; experience was sure to come to them ; and with wits and experience there is nothing known among squirrels of their kind that these two would not learn for themselves.

And there was not much known to squirrels that these two did not know, apparently without even learning. As they grew in size they increased exceedingly in naughtiness, and were banished shortly from the kitchen to an ell or back woodshed. They celebrated this distinction by dropping some hickory-nuts into a rubber boot hanging on the wall, and then gnawing a hole through the toe of the boot in order to extract the hidden nuts. Was it mischief that led them to gnaw through rather than go down the top ? Or did something get stuffed into the top of the boot after the nuts were dropped in ? And did the squirrels *remember* that the nuts

were in there, or did they *smell* them through the rubber?

One woodshed is big enough only for two squirrels. The family moved everything out but the wood, and the squirrels took possession for the winter. Their first nest had been built behind the hot-water tank. They knew *how* to build without any teaching. But knowing how is not all there is to know about building; knowing *where* is very important, and this they had to learn.

Immediately on coming to the woodshed the squirrels began their winter nest, a big, bulky, newspaper affair, which they placed up in the northwest corner of the shed directly under the shingles. Here they slept till late in the fall. This was the shaded side and the most exposed corner of the whole house; but all went well until one night when the weather suddenly turned very cold. A strong wind blew from the northwest hard upon the squirrels' nest.

The next day there was great activity in the woodshed—a scampering of lively feet, that began early in the morning and continued far toward noon. The squirrels were moving. They

gathered up their newspaper nest and carried it —diagonally—across the shed from the shaded northwest to the sunny southeast corner, where they rebuilt and slept snug throughout the winter.

Calico did not teach them this ; neither would their own squirrel mother have taught them. They knew how, to begin with. They knew *where* after one night of experience, which in this case had to be a night of shivers.

THE SPARROW ROOST



THE SPARROW ROOST

AN early December twilight was settling over Boston, a thick foggy murk that soaked down full of smoke and smell and chill. The streets were oozy with a wet snow which had fallen through the afternoon and had been trodden into mud ; and draughty with an east wind, that would have passed unnoticed across the open fields, but which drew up these narrow flues and sent a shiver down one's back in spite

of coats. It was half-past five. The stores were closing, their clerks everywhere eddying into the noisy streams of wheels and hoofs still pouring up and down. The traffic tide had turned, but had not yet ebbed away.

And this was evening! the coming night! I moved along with the crowd, homesick for the wideness and quiet of the country, for the sighing of the pines, the distant bang of a barn door, the night cry of guineas from some neighboring farm, when, in the hurry and din, I caught the cry of bird voices, and looking up, found that I had stumbled upon a bird roost—at the very heart of the city! I was in front of King's Chapel Burial Ground, whose half-dozen leafless trees were alive with noisy sparrows.

The crowd swept on. I halted behind a waste-barrel by the iron fence and forgot the sighing pines and clacking guineas.

Bird roosts of this size are no common find. I remember a huge fireplace chimney that stood near my home, into which a cloud of swallows used to swarm for a few nights preceding the fall migration; I lived some years close to the pines at the head of Cubby Hollow, where great

flocks of crows slept nightly throughout the winter ; but these, besides now and again a temporary resting-place, a mere caravansary along the route of the migrants, were all I had happened upon. Here was another, bordering a city street, overhanging the street, with a blazing electric light to get into bed by !

Protected by the barrel from the jostle on the sidewalk, I waited by the ancient graveyard until the electric lights grew bright, until every fussing sparrow was quiet, until I could see only little gray balls and blurs in the trees through the misty drizzle that came down with the night. Then I turned toward my own snug roost, five flights up, next the roof, and just a block away, as the sparrows fly, from this roost of theirs. I was glad to have them so near me.

The windows of my roost look out over roofs of slate, painted tin, and tarry pebbles, into a chimney-fenced plot of sky. Occasionally, during the winter, a herring-gull from the harbor swims into this bit of smoky blue ; frequently a pigeon, sometimes a flock, sails past ; and in the summer dusk, after the swallows quit it, a city-haunting night-hawk climbs out of the for-

est of chimney-pots, up, up above the smoke for his booming roofward swoop. But winter and summer, save along through June, the sparrows, as evening falls, cut across the sky field on their way to the roost in the old burial-ground. There go two, there twoscore in a whirling, scudding flurry, like a swift-blown bunch of autumn leaves. For more than an hour they keep passing—till the dusk turns to darkness, till all are tucked away in bed.

One would scarcely recognize the birds as they sweep past in these flurries, their flight is so unlike their usual clumsy scuttle as they get out of one's way along the street. They are lumpish and short-winged on the street; they labor and lumber off with a sidewise twist to their bodies that reminds one of a rheumatic old dog upon the trot. What suggestion of grace or swiftness about them upon the ground? But watch them in their evening flight. It is a revelation. They rise above the houses and shoot across my sky like a charge of canister. I can almost hear them whizz. Down by the cemetery I have seen them dash into view high up in the slit of sky, dive for the trees, dart zigzag like

a madly plunging kite, and hurl themselves, as soft as breaths, among the branches.

This is going to bed with a vengeance. I never saw any other birds get to roost with such velocity. It is characteristic, however; the sparrow never does anything by halves. The hurry is not caused by any mite of anxiety or fear, rather from pure excess of spirit; for after rearing three broods during the summer, he has such a superabundance of vim that a winter of foraging and fighting is welcome exercise. The strenuous life is his kind of life. When the day's hunt is over and he turns back to his bed, why not race it out with his neighbors? And so they come—chasing, dodging, tagging neck and neck, all spurting to finish first at the roost.

We may not love him; but he has constitution and snap. And these things do count.

One April morning, the 6th, I went down to the roost at three o'clock. The sparrows were sleeping soundly. It was yet night. Had the dawn been reaching up above the dark walls that shut the east away from the high tree-tops, the garish street light would have kept it dim. The trees were silent and stirless, as quiet as the

graves beneath them—more quiet, in fact; for there issued from a grated hole among the tombs the sound of an anvil, deep down and muffled, but unmistakably ringing, as if Governor Winthrop were forging chains in his vault. Then came a rush, a deadened roar, and an emanation of dank gaseous breath, such as the dead alone breathe.

It was only the passing of a tool-car in the subway underneath the cemetery, and the hammering of a workman at a forge in a niche of the tunnel. But, rising out of the tombs, it was gruesome and unearthly in the night-quiet.

The sparrows did not mind the sound. Maybe it ascended as a pleasant murmur to them and shaped their dreams, as dream-stuff drifts to their sweet-voiced cousins in the meadows with the lap and lave of the streams. A carriage rolled by. The clank of hoofs disturbed none of them. Some one slammed the door of an apothecary-shop across the street, and hurried off. Not a sparrow stirred.

I was trying to see whether the birds slept with their heads beneath their wings. Appa-

rently they did, for I could not make out a head, though some of the sleepers hung over the street within ten feet of the lamp-post. But they were all above the light, with only their breasts out of the shadows, and to be certain I must make a bird move. Finding that the noises were not likely to arouse them, I threw a stick against one of the laden limbs. There were heads then, plenty of them, and every one, evidently, had been turned back and buried in the warm wing-coverts.

My stick hit very near the toes of one of the sparrows, and he flew. There was a twitter, then a stir all over the tree ; but nothing further happening, they tucked in their heads again and went back to bed.

I waited. At four o'clock they still slept. The moon had swung out from behind the high buildings and now hung just above the slender spire of Park Street Church, looking down into the deep, narrow street gulch. A cat picked her way among the graves, sprang noiselessly to the top of a flat tomb beneath the sparrows, and watched with me. The creature brought the wilderness with her. After all, this was not so

far removed from the woods. In the empty street, beneath the silent, shuttered walls, with something still of the mystery of the night winds in the bare trees, the scene, for an instant, was touched with the spell of the dark and the untamed.

After a swift warming walk of fifteen minutes I returned to the roost. There were signs of waking now: a flutter here, a twitter there, then quiet again, with no general movement until half-past four, when the city lights were shut off. Then, instantly, from a dozen branches sounded loud, clear chirps, and every sparrow opened his eyes. The incandescent bulbs about the border of the roost were moon and stars to them, lights in the firmament of their heaven to divide the night from the day. When they blazed forth, it was evening—bedtime; when they went out, it was morning—the time to wake up.

The softness of dusk, how unknown to these city dwellers! and the fresh sweet beauty of the dawn!

Morning must have begun to break along near four o'clock, for the cold gray across the

sky was already passing into pearl. The country birds had been up half an hour, I am sure. However, the old cemetery was wide enough awake now. There was chirping everywhere. It grew louder and more general every moment, till shortly the six thousand voices, and more, were raised in the cheerful din—the matin, if you please, for as yet only a few of the birds were fighting.

But the fight quickly spread. It is the English sparrow's way of waking up; his way of whetting his appetite for breakfast; his way of digesting his dinner; his way of settling his supper—his normal waking way.

To the clatter of voices was added the flutter of wings; for the birds had begun to shift perches, and to exchange slaps as well as to call names—the movement setting toward the tree-tops. None of the sparrows had left the roost. The storm of chatter increased and the buzz of wings quickened into a steady whirl, the noise holding its own with that of the ice-wagons pounding past. The birds were filling the top-most branches, a gathering of the clans, evidently, for the day's start. The clock in Scollay

Square station pointed to five minutes to five, and just before the hour struck, two birds launched out and spun away.

The exodus had commenced. The rest of Boston was not stirring yet. It was still early ; hardly a flush of warmth had washed the pearl. But the sparrows had many matters to attend to before all the milkmen and bakers got abroad : they must take their morning dust-bath, for one thing, in the worn places between the cobblestones, before the street-sprinkler began its sloppy rounds.

There was a constant whirl out of the tree-tops now. Occasionally a bird flew off alone, but most of them left in small flocks, just as I should see them return in the evening. Doubtless the members of these flocks were the birds belonging to certain neighborhoods, those that nested and fed about certain squares, large door-yards, and leafy courts. They may indeed have been families that were hatched last summer.

The birds that left singly went away, as a rule, over the roofs toward the denser business sections of the city, while the bands, as I had noticed them come in at night, took the opposite

course, toward Cambridge and Charlestown. Not more than one in a hundred flew south across the city.

Of course there are sparrows all over Boston. There is no street too narrow, too noisy, too dank with the smell of leather for them. They seem as numerous where the rush of drays is thickest as in the open breathing-places where the fountains play. They are in every quarter, yet those to the east and south of the old burial-ground do not belong to the roost. Perhaps they have graveyards of their own in their sections, though I have been unable to find them. So far as I know, this is the only roost in or about Boston. And this is the stranger since so few of the total number of the Boston sparrows sleep here. A careful estimate showed me that there could not have been more than six or seven thousand in the roost. One would almost say there were as many millions in Boston. And where do these millions sleep? For the most part, each one alone behind his sign-board or shutter near his local feeding-grounds.

Now, why should the sparrows of the roost prefer King's Chapel Burial Ground to the Old

Granary, a stone's throw up the street? I passed the Old Granary yard on my way to the roost and found the trees empty. I searched the limbs with my glass; there was not a sparrow to be seen. Still, the Granary is the less exposed of the two. It may not formerly have been so; but at present high sheltering walls bend about the trees like a well. Years ago, perhaps, when the sparrows began to roost in the trees at King's Chapel, the Old Granary elms were more open to the winds, and now force of habit and example keep the birds returning to the first lodge.

Back they come, no matter what the weather. There are a thousand cozy corners into which a sparrow might creep on a stormy night, where even the winds that know their way through Boston streets could not search him out. But the instinct to do as he always has done is as strong in the sparrow, in spite of his love for pioneering, as it is in the rest of us. He was brought here to roost as soon as he could fly, when the leaves were on and the nights delicious. If the leaves go and the nights change, what of that? Here he began, here he will con-

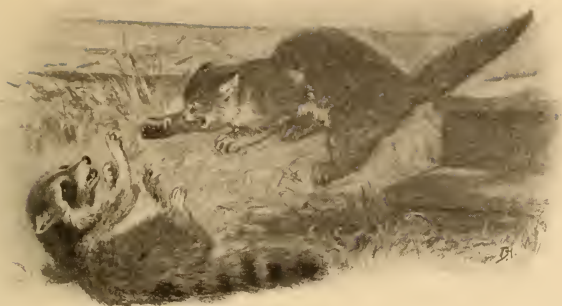
tinue to sleep. Let it rain, blow, snow ; let the sleet, like a slimy serpent, creep up the trunk and wrap around the twigs : still he will hold on. Many a night I have seen them sleeping through a driving winter rain, their breasts to the storm, their tails hanging straight down, shedding every drop. If a gale is blowing, and it is cold, they get to the leeward of the tree, as close to the trunk as possible, and anchor fast, every bill pointing into the wind, every feather reefed, every tail lying out on the flat of the storm.

As I watched the bands starting from the tree-tops of the roost I wondered if they really crossed the river into Cambridge and Charlestown. A few mornings later I was again up early, hastening down to the West Boston Bridge to see if I could discover the birds going over. As I started out I saw bunches moving toward the river with a free and easy flight, but whether I reached the bridge too late, or whether they scattered and went over singly, I do not know. Only now and then did a bird cross, and he seemed to come from along the shore rather than from above the house-tops.

I concluded that the birds of the roost were strictly Bostonians. One evening, however, about a week later, as I was upon this bridge coming from Cambridge, a flock of sparrows whizzed past me, dipped over the rail to the water, swung up above the wall of houses, and disappeared toward the roost. They were on their way from Cambridge, from the classic elms of Harvard campus, who knows, to the elms of the ancient burial-ground.

It was five that April morning when the first sparrow left the roost. By half-past five the trees were empty, except for the few birds whose hunting-ground included the cemetery. By this time the city, too, had yawned, and rubbed its eyes, and tumbled out of bed.

“MUX”



“ MUX ”

NO, “Mux” is not an elegant name—not to be compared with Ronald or Claudia, for instance; and I want to say it is not the name of one of my children, though its owner was once a member of my household. Mux was a tame half-grown coon, with just the ordinary number of rings around his tail, but with the most extraordinary amount of mischief in his little coon soul. Perhaps he had no real soul, and I should have located his mischief somewhere else. If so, then I should say in his feet. I never saw any other feet so expressive. The

essence of the little beast seemed concentrated in his fore paws. If they made trouble, whose fault was it? They were designed for trouble. You could see this purpose in them as plainly as you could see the purpose in a swallow's wings. Whenever Mux ran across the yard these paws picked up trouble out of the turf, just as if the grass were trouble-filings, and Mux a kind of four-footed magnet. He never went far before they clogged and stopped him.

One day, the first day that Mux was given the liberty of the yard, who should he run foul of but Tom! The struggle had to come sometime, and it was just as well that it came thus early, while Tom and Mux were on an equal footing as to size, for Mux was young and growing.

Tom was boss of the yard. Every farmer's dog that went to town by our gate knew enough to pass by on the other side. Tom had grown a little lordly and opinionated. He was sleeping in the sun on the shed-step as Mux ambled up. At sight of the coon Tom rose in more than his usual feline mightiness and cast such a look of surprise, scorn, and annihilating intent upon the interloper as ought to have struck terror to the

stoutest heart. But Mux hardly seemed to understand. On he came, right into certain destruction, a very lamb of innocence and meekness. O you unsuspecting little stranger! Don't you see this awful monster swelling, swelling into this hideous hump? No, Mux did not see him. Tom was raging. His teeth gleamed; his eyes blazed green; his claws worked in a nervous way that made my flesh creep. He was vanishing, not, like the Cheshire Cat, into a long lovely grin, but vanishing from a four-legged cat into a yellow, one-legged hump. All that was left of him now was hump.

Mux was only a few feet away. Tom began to advance, not directly, but just a trifle on the bias, across Mux's bows so to speak, as if to give him a broadside. They were within range. Tom was heaving to. I trembled for the young coon. Suddenly there was a hiss, a flash of yellow in the air, and—a very big surprise awaiting Thomas! That little coon was no stupid after all. He had not rolled up his sleeves, nor doubled up his fists, nor put a chip upon his shoulder; but he knew what was expected of him, just the same. He snapped instantly upon

his back, received the cat with all four of his feet, and gave Mr. Tom such a combing down that his golden fur went flying off like thistle-down in autumn.

It was all over in less than half a minute. I think Tom must have made a new record for himself in the running high jump when he broke away from his ring-tailed antagonist. He struck out across the yard and landed midway up the clothes-post with a single bound. And Mux? He ambled on around the yard, as calm and unconcerned as if he had only stopped to scratch himself.

Much of this unconcern, however, was a quiet kind of swagger. When he thought no one fiercer than a chicken or the humbled Mr. Tom was looking, he would shuffle across the yard with his coat collar turned up, his hat over his eye, his elbows angled—just as if he had been born and bred on the Bowery instead of in the Bear Swamp. He was king of the yard, but I could see that he wore his crown uneasily. He kept a bold front, accepted every challenge, and even went out of his way to pick a quarrel; yet he quaked at heart continually. He feared and

hated the noises of the yard, particularly the crowing of our big buff cochin rooster and the screaming of the guineas. This was one of the swamp-fears that he had brought with him and could not outlive. It haunted him. If he had a conscience, its only warnings were of coming noises great and terrible.

But Mux had no conscience, unless it was one that troubled him only when he was out of mischief. His face was never so long and so solemn as when I had caught him in some questionable act or spoiled some wayward plan.

Mux, however, was possessed by a much sturder spirit than this interesting mischief-devil. Upon one point he was positively demented—the only four-footed maniac I ever knew. He had gone crazy on the subject of dirt, mad to wash things, especially his victuals.

He was not particular about what he ate ; almost anything that could be swallowed would do, provided that it could be washed, and washed by himself, after his own approved fashion.

If I gave him half of my apple, he would squat down by his wash-tub and begin to hunt

for dirt. He would look the apple over and over, pick around the blossom end, inspect carefully, then pull out the stem, if there happened to be a stem, dig out the seeds and peek into the core, then douse it into the water and begin to wash. He would rub with might and main for a second or two, then rinse it, take a bite, and douse it back again for more scrubbing, until it was scrubbed and chewed away.

Even when the water was thick with mud, this crazy coon persisted in washing his clean cake and cabbage therein. Indeed, the muddier the water, the more vigorously would he wash. The habit was a part of him, as real a thing in his constitution as the black ring in his fur. It was a very dirty habit, here in captivity, even if it went by the name of washing. Of course Mux could not be blamed for his soiled wash-water. That was my fault ; only I could n't be changing it every time he soaked up a fistful of earth in his endeavor to wash something to eat out of it. No ; he was not at fault, altogether, for the mud in his tub. Out in the Bear Swamp, the streams that wandered about under the great high-spreading gums, and lost their way

in the shadows, were crystal-clear and pure ; and out there it was intended that he should dwell, and in those sweet streams that he should wash. But what a modicum of wit, of originality the little beast had, that, because he was born a washer, wash he must, though he washed in mud, nay, though he washed upon the upturned bottom of his empty tub !—for this is what Mux did sometimes.

I never blamed Aunt Milly for insisting upon this rather ill-sounding name of “Mux” for the little coon. She was standing by his cage, shortly after his arrival, watching him eat cabbage. He washed every clean white piece of it in his oozy tub before tasting it, coating the bits over with mud as you do the lumps of fondant with chocolate in making “chocolate creams.” Aunt Milly looked at him for some time with scornful face and finally exclaimed :

“ Umph ! Dat animile am a dumb beast shu' ! Rubbin' dirt right inter clean cabbage ! Sich muxin' ! mux, mux, mux ! Dat a coon ? Dat ain't no coon. Dat 's a mux ! ” And she scuffed off to the house, mumbling, “ De muxinest thing I done evah seen.” Hence his name.

If there is one sweetmeat sweeter than all others to a coon, it is a frog. It was not mere chance that Mux was born in the edge of the Bear Swamp, close to the wide marshes that ran out to the river. This was the great country of the frogs—the milk-and-honey country to the ring-tailed family in the hollow gum. But Mux had never tasted frog. He had not been weaned when I kidnapped him. One day, wishing to see if he knew what a frog was, I carelessly offered him a big spotted fellow that I had caught in the meadow.

Did he know a frog? He fairly snatched the poor thing from me, killed it, and started around the cage with it in his mouth, dancing like a cannibal. His long, serious face was more thoughtful and solemn, however, than usual. I was puzzled. I had heard of dancing at funerals. Either this was such a dance, or else some wild orgy to propitiate the spirits that preside over the destiny of coons.

Throughout this gruesome rite Mux held the frog in his mouth, and I watched, expecting, hoping every moment that he would swallow it. Suddenly he stopped, sat down by his tub,

pulled some dead grass out of it, plunged the frog in, and began to scrub it—began to scrub the frog in the oozy contents of that tub, when the poor amphibian had been soaking in spring-water ever since it was a tadpole !

No matter. The frog must be washed. And washed it was. It was scoured first with all his might, then placed in the bottom of the tub, under water, held down by one fore paw, until the maniac could get in with his hind feet upon it, and then danced upon ; from here it was laid upon the floor of the cage and kneaded until as limp as a lump of dough ; then lifted daintily, it was shaken round and round in the water, rinsed and wrung, and minutely inspected, and—swallowed.

I felt justified in keeping this animal caged. He was not fit to run loose even in the Bear Swamp. Perhaps I have done him wrong in this story of the frog. Frogs may need washing, after all, despite the fact that they are never out of the bath-tub long enough to dry off once in their whole lives. Mux knew more about frogs than I, doubtless. But Mux insisted upon washing oysters.

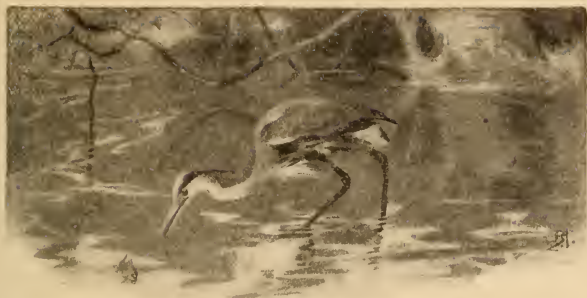
Now there are few people clothed in sane minds who do not like raw oysters. Mark this, however : when you see a person wash raw oysters, keep out of his way ; he has lost either his wits or his morals. The only two creatures I ever knew to wash raw oysters were Mux and an oyster-dealer in Cambridge Street, Boston. I saw this dealer take up a two-gallon can that had just arrived at his store, and dump the dark salty shell-fish into a great colander, stick the end of a piece of rubber hose in among them, turn the water on, and stir and soak them. How white they got ! How fat they got ! How their ghastly corpses swelled !

Mux did not wash his to see them swell, but simply that he might take no chances with dirt—or poison, for I used to think sometimes that he thought I was trying to poison him. He was desperately fond of oysters. But who could cast his pearls, or, to be scientifically and literally correct, his mothers of pearls, before such a swine ? Mux had just one plateful of oysters while I was his keeper. They were nice plump fellows, and when I saw the maniac soak one all stringy and tasteless I poured his wash-water

out. Was he to be balked that way? No, no. He took oyster number two, flopped it into the empty tub, scoured it around on the muddy bottom, looked it over as carefully as he had done stringy number one, and swallowed sandy, muddy number two with just as much relish.

This was too much. I cuffed him and took away the tub. This I suppose was wrong, for I understand you must never oppose crazy persons. Well, Mux helped himself to oyster number three. There was no water, no tub. But what were oysters for if not to be washed? And who was he but *Procyon lotor*—*Procyon* “the washer”? Can the leopard change his spots or the racoon his habits? Can he? Shall he? I could almost hear him muttering under his breath, “To be, or not to be: that is the question.” Then he darted a triumphantly malicious glance at me, retreated to the back of his cage, thrust his oyster out of sight beneath the straw of his bed, and washed it—washed the oyster in the straw, washed it into a fistful of sticks and chaff, and gloated as he swallowed it.

RACoon CREEK



RACCOON CREEK

Into the wode to her the briddes sing.

I

OVER the creek, and clearing it by a little, hung a snow-white, stirless mist, its under surface even and parallel with the face of the water, its upper surface peaked and billowed halfway to the tops of the shore-skirting trees.

As I dipped along, my head was enveloped in the cloud ; but bending over the skiff, I could see far up the stream between a mist-ceiling and a water-floor, as through a long, low room. How deep and dark seemed the water! And the

trees how remote, aërial, and floating! as if growing in the skies, with no roots' fast hold of the earth. Filling the valley, conforming to every bend and stretch of the creek, lay the breath of the water, motionless and sheeted, a spirit stream, hovering over the sluggish current a moment, before it should float upward and melt away. It was cold, too, as a wraith might be, colder than the water, for the June sun had not yet risen over the swamp.

At the bridge where the road crossed was a dam which backed the creek out into an acre or more of pond. Not a particle of mud discolored the water; but it was dark, and as it came tumbling, foaming over the moss-edged gates it lighted up a rich amber color, the color of strong tea. In the half chill of the dawn the old bridge lay veiled in smoking spray, in a thin, rising vapor of spiey odors, clean, medicinal odors, as of the brewing of many roots, the fragrance of shores of sedges, ferns, and aromatic herbs steeped in the slow, soft tide. And faint across the creek, the road, and the fields lay the pondy smell of spatter-docks.

I pushed out from the sandy cove and lay

with a reach of the lusty docks between me and either shore. It was early morning. The yellow, dew-laid road down which I came still slumbered undisturbed; the village cows had not been milked, and the pasture slope, rounding with a feminine grace of curve and form, lay asleep, with its sedgy fingers trailing in the water; even the locomotive in the little terminal round-house over the hill was not awake and wheezing. But the creek people were stirring—except the frogs. They were growing sleepy. The long June night they had improved, soberly, philosophically; and now, seeing nothing worth while in the dawn of this wonder day, they had begun to doze. But the birds were alive, full of the crisp June morning, of its overflow of gladness, and were telling their joy in chorus up and down both banks of the creek.

Hearkneth thise blisful briddes how they singe.

Do you mean out in Finsbury Moor, Father Chaucer? They were sweet along the banks of the Walbrook, I know, for among them “maken melodye” were the skylark, ethereal minstrel! and the nightingale. But, Father Chaucer, you

should have heard the wood-thrushes, the orchard-orioles—this whole morning chorus singing along the creek! No one may know how blissful, how wide, how thrilling the singing of birds can be unless he has listened when the summer mists are rising over Racoon Creek.

There is no song-hour after sunrise to compare with this for spirit and volume of sound. The difference between the singing in the dusk and in the dawn is the difference between the slow, sweet melody of a dirge and the triumphant, full-voiced peal of a wedding march. Even one who has always lived in the country can scarcely believe his ears the first time he is afield in June at the birds' awaking-hour.

Robins led the singing along the creek. They always do. In New Jersey, Massachusetts, Michigan,—everywhere it is the same,—they outnumber all rivals three to one. It is necessary to listen closely in order to distinguish the other voices. This particular morning, however, the wood-thrushes were all arranged up the copsy hillside at my back, and so reinforced each other that their part was not overborne by robin song. One of the thrushes was perched upon a willow

stub along the edge of the water, so near that I could see every flirt of his wings, could almost count the big spots in his sides. Softly, calmly, with the purest joy he sang, pausing at the end of every few bars to preen and call. His song was the soul of serenity, of all that is spiritual. Accompanied by the lower, more continuous notes from among the trees, it rose, a clear, pure, wonderful soprano, lifting the whole wide chorus nearer heaven.

Farther along the creek, on the border of the swamp, the red-shouldered blackbirds were massed; chiming in everywhere sang the cat-birds, white-eyed vireos, yellow warblers, orchard-orioles, and Maryland yellowthroats; and at short intervals, soaring for a moment high over the other voices, sounded the thrilling, throbbing notes of the cardinal, broken suddenly and drowned by the roll of the flicker, the wild, weird cry of the great-crested flycatcher, or the rapid, hay-rake rattle of the belted kingfisher.

All at once a narrow breeze cut a swath through the mist just across my bows, turned, spread, caught the severed cloud in which I was drifting, and whirled it up and away. The head of

the pond and the upper creek were still shrouded, while around me only breaths of the white flecked the water and the spatter-docks. The breeze had not stirred a ripple; the current here in the broad of the pond was imperceptible; and I lay becalmed on the edge of the open channel, among the rank leaves and golden knobs of the docks.

A crowd of chimney-swallows gathered over the pond for a morning bath. Half a hundred of them were wheeling, looping, and cutting about me in a perfect maze of orbits, as if so many little black shuttles had borrowed wings and gone crazy with freedom. They had come to wash—a very proper thing to do, for there are few birds or beasts that need it more. It was highly fitting for sooty little Tom, seeing he had to turn into something, to become a Water Baby. And if these smaller, winged sweeps of our American chimneys are contemplating a metamorphosis, it ought to be toward a similar life of soaking.

They must have been particularly sooty this morning. One plunge apiece, so far from sufficing, seemed hardly a beginning. They kept diving

in over and over, continuing so long that finally I grew curious to know how many dips they were taking, and so, in order to count his dives, I singled one out, after most of the flock had done and gone off to hawk. How many he had taken before I marked him, and how many more he took after I lost him among the other birds, I cannot say ; but, standing up in the skiff, I followed him around and around until he made his nineteenth splash,—in less than half as many minutes,—when I got so groggy that his twentieth splash I came near taking with him.

The pond narrows toward the head, and just before it becomes a creek again the channel turns abruptly through the docks in against the right shore, where the current curls and dimples darkly under the drooping branches of great red maple ; then it horseshoes into the middle, coming down through small bush-islands and tangled brush which deepen into an extensive swamp.

June seemed a little tardy here, but the elder, the rose, and the panicked cornel were almost ready, the button-bushes were showing ivory, while the arrow-wood, fully open, was glistening snowily everywhere, its tiny flower crowns fall-

ing and floating in patches down-stream, its oversweet breath hanging heavy in the morning mist. My nose was in the air all the way for magnolias and water-lilies, yet never a whiff from either shore, so particular, so unaccountably notional are some of the high-caste flowers with regard to their homes.

The skiff edged slowly past the first of the islands, a mere hummock about a yard square, and was turning a sharp bend farther up, when I thought I had a glimpse of yellowish wings, a mere guess of a bird shadow, dropping among the dense maple saplings and elder of the islet.

Had I seen or simply imagined something? If I had seen wings, then they were not those of the thrasher,—the first bird that came to mind,—for they slipped, sank, dropped through the bushes, with just a hint of dodging in their movement, not exactly as a thrasher would have moved.

Drifting noiselessly back, I searched the tangle and must have been looking directly at the bird several seconds before cutting it out from the stalks and branches. It was a least bittern, a female. She was clinging to a perpendicular

stem of elder, hand over hand, wren fashion, her long neck thrust straight into the air, absolutely stiff and statuesque.

We were less than a skiff's length apart, each trying to outpose and outstare the other. I won. Human eyes are none the strongest, neither is human patience, yet I have rarely seen a creature that could outwait a man. The only steady, straightforward eye in the Jungle was Mowgli's—because it was the only one with a steady mind behind it. As soon as the bird let herself look me squarely in the eye, she knew she was discovered, that her little trick of turning into a stub was seen through; and immediately, ruffling her feathers, she lowered her head, poked out her neck at me, and swaying from side to side like a caged bear, tried to scare me, glaring and softly growling.

Off she flopped as I landed. The nest might be upon the ground or lodged among the bushes; but the only ground space large enough was covered layer over layer with pearly clam-shells, the kitchen-midden of some muskrat; and the bushes were empty. I went to the other islets, searched bog and tangle, and finally pulled away

disappointed, giving the least bittern credit for considerable mother-wit and woodcraft. How little wit she really had appeared on my return down-creek that afternoon.

I had now entered the high, overhanging swamp, where the shaggy trees, the looping vines, and the rank, pulpos undergrowth grew thick on both sides, reaching far back, a wet, heavy wilderness without a path, except for the silent feet of the mink and the otter, and the more silent feet of the creek, here a narrow stream winding darkly down through the shadows.

Every little while along the rooty, hummocky banks of the creek I would pass a muskrat's slide. Here was one at the butt of a tulip-poplar, its platform wet and freshly trodden, its "dive" shooting sheer over a root into the stream. Farther on stood a large tussock whose top was trampled flat and covered with sedge-roots. I could not resist putting my nose down for a sniff, so good is the smell of a fresh trail, so close are we to the rest of the pack. In the thick of the swamp I stopped a moment to examine the footprints of an otter at a shallow, shelving place along the bank, where, opening

through the skunk-cabbage and Indian turnip, and covered almost ankle-deep with water, was the creature's runway.

I had moved leisurely along, yet not aimlessly. The whole June day was mine to waste ; but it would not be well wasted if nothing more purposeful than wasting were in mind.

One does not often drift to a port. Going into the woods to see anything is a very sure way of seeing little or nothing ; and taking the path to anywhere is certain to lead one nowhere in particular. Many interested, nature-loving people fail to enjoy the out-of-doors simply because they have no definite spot to reach, no flower, bird, or bug to find when they enter the fields and woods. Going forth "to commune with nature" sounds very fine, but it is much more difficult work than conversing with the Sphinx. In order to draw near to nature I require a pole with a hook and line on the end of it. While I watch the float and wait, if there is any communion, it is nature who holds it with me through the medium of the pole. I need to have an errand to do ; some berries to pick, a patch of potatoes to hoe (a very small

patch) ; an engagement to keep, like Thoreau, with a tree, if I hope to squander with profit even the laziest summer day.

I was heading up-stream toward a deep sandy-sided pool that was bottomed, or rather unbottomed, by the shadows of overhanging beeches. The pool was alive with racoon-perch. A few mornings before this, a boy from a neighboring farm had come to fish here and had found a fisher ahead of him. He was just about to cast, when back under the limbs of the beeches the water broke, and a mink rose to the surface with a fine perch twisting in her jaws. Straight toward the boy she swam till within reach of his rod, when she recognized the human in him, turned a back-dive somersault, and vanished.

Would she be fishing again this morning? I hoped so. It was her hour—the hour of the rising mist ; visitors rarely found their way to the pool ; and I knew the appearance of the boy had given her no lasting alarm.

Floating around the bend, I pulled in among the shore bushes by a bit of grape-vine, and sitting down upon it, made my boat fast. I had

planned the trip with the hope of seeing this mink ; so I waited, quite hidden, though having the pool in full view. An hour passed, but no mink appeared. Another hour, and the sun was breaking upon the beeches, and the mist was gone ; yet no mink came to fish. And what mink would ? Of course you must have it in mind to see a mink fish if you wish to see anything ; but the day you really catch the mink fishing will likely be the day you went out to watch for muskrats.

So an hour's waiting is rarely fruitless. The mink did not come, but another and quite as expert a fisher did. All the way up the creek I had been hearing the throaty *ghouw-bhouw* of a great blue heron off in the swamp. It was he that came for perch.

The flapping of the great blue heron is a sight good for the soul—an unheard-of motion these days, so moderate, unhurried, and time-contemning ! The wing-beats of this one, as he came dangling down upon the meadow opposite me, have often given me pause since. If I could have the wings of the great blue heron and flap to my fishing now and again !

On alighting, however, he was instantly all nerve and tension. With the utmost caution he came over the high sedges on his stilt-like legs to the brink of the creek and posed. I doubt if a frog or a minnow could have told he was a thing of life. Stiff as a stub, every muscle taut, all alert, he stood, till—flash! and the long pointed bill pinned a perch, a foot and a half beneath the water. He had quite made out a breakfast, when, stepping upon a tall tussock, he stood face to face with me—a human spectator! It was only for a moment that I could keep motionless enough to puzzle him. Some muscle must have twitched, for he understood and leaped into the air with a croak of mortal fright.

II

THE creek was roped off by the sagging fox grape-vines, and barred, from this point on, by the alders, so that I gave up all attempt at farther ascent. I had already given up the mink; yet I waited under the beeches.

It was blazing overhead, growing hotter and closer all the time, with hardly breeze enough to

disturb the sleep of the leaf shadows on the sleepy stream. A rusty, red-bellied water-snake, in a mat of briars near by, relaxed and straightened slowly out,—and softly, that I might not be attracted,—stretching himself to the warmth. I could have broken his back with my paddle, and perhaps, by so doing, saved the nestlings of a pair of Maryland yellowthroats fidgeting about near him. He had eaten many a young bird of these bushes, I was sure—yet only circumstantially sure. Catching him in the act of robbing a nest would have been different ; I should have felt justified then in despatching him. But to strike him asleep in the sun simply because he was a snake would have robbed the spot of part of its life and spirit and robbed me of serenity for the rest of the day. I should not have been able to enjoy the quiet again until I had said my prayers and slept.

And as between the hawks and other wild birds, we need not interfere. While the water-snake was spreading himself, a small hawk, a sharp-shinned, I think, came beating over the meadow and was met by a vigilance committee of red-shouldered blackbirds. He did not stop

to eat any of them, but darted up, and they after him. On up he went, round and round in a rapid, mounting spiral, till only one of the daring redwings followed. I watched. Up they went, higher than I had ever seen a blackbird venture before. And against such unequal odds! But the hawk was scared and had not stopped to look back. He circled; the blackbird cut across inside and caught him on almost every round. And still higher in pure bravado the redwing forced him. I began to tremble for the plucky bird, when I saw him turn, half fold his shining wings, and shoot straight down—a meteor of jet with fire flying from its opposite sides—down, down, while I held my breath. Suddenly the wings flashed, and he was scaling a steep incline; another flash, a turn, and he was upon a slower plane—had thrown himself against the air and settled upon the swaying top of a brown cattail.

A quiet had been creeping over the swamp and meadow. The dry rasp of a dragon-fly's wings was loud in the grass. The stream beneath the beeches darkened and grew moody as the light neared its noon intensity; the beech-

leaves hung limp and silent ; a catbird settled near me with dropped tail and head drawn in between her shoulders, as mute as the leaves ; the Maryland yellowthroat broke into a sharp gallop of song at intervals,—he would have to clatter a little on doomsday, if that day fell in June,—but the intervals were far apart. The meadow shimmered. No part of the horizon was in sight—only the sky overhanging the little open of grass, and this was cloudless, though far from blue.

Perhaps there was not a real sign of uneasiness anywhere except in my boat ; yet I felt something ominous in this silent, stifled noon. After all, I ought to have scotched the rusty, red-bellied water-snake leering at me now. The croak of the great blue heron sounded again ; then far away, mysterious and spirit-like, floated a soft *qua, qua, qua*—the cry of the least bittern out of the heart of the swamp.

I loosed the grape-vine, put in my paddle, and turned down-stream, with an urgent desire to get out of the swamp, out where I could see about me. I made no haste, lest the stream, the swamp, the something that made me uneasy,

should know. Not that I am superstitious, though I should have been had I lived when the land was all swamp and wood and prairie; and I should be now were I a sailor. My boat slipped swiftly along under the thick-shadowing trees, and rounding a sharp bend, brought me to the open pond, to the sky, and to a sight that explained my disquietude. The west, half-way to the zenith, was green—the black-and-blue green of bruised flesh. Out of it shot a fork of lightning, and behind it rumbled muffled thunder.

There was no time to descend the pond. I could already hear the wind across the silence and suspense. It was one of the supreme moments of the summer. The very trees seemed breathless and awe-struck. Pushing quickly to the wooded shore, I drew out the boat, turned it over, and crawled under it just as the leaves stirred with the first cool, wet breath.

There was an instant's lull, a tremor through the ground; then the rending and crunching of the wind monster in the oaks, the shriek of the forest victim—and the wind was gone. The rain followed with fearful violence, the lightning sizzled and cracked among the trees, and the

thunder burst just above the boat—all holding on to finish the wind's work.

It was soon over. The leaves were dripping when I crept out of my shell ; the afternoon sun was blinking through a million gleaming tears, and the storm was rumbling far away, behind the swamp. A robin lighted upon a branch over me, and set off its load of drops, which rattled down on my boat's bottom like a charge of shot. I glided into the stream. Down the pond where I had seen the sullen clouds was now an indescribable freshness and glory of shining hills and shining sky. The air had been washed and was still hanging across the heavens undried. The maple-leaves showed silver ; the flock of chimney-swifts had returned, and among them, twinkling white and blue and brown, were tree-swallows and barn-swallows squeaking in their flight like new harness ; a pair of night-hawks played back and forth across the water, too, awakened, probably, by the thunder, or else mistaken in the green darkness of the storm, thinking it the twilight ; and the creek up and down as far as I could hear was ringing with bird-calls.

There had been a perceptible rise and quickening of the current. It was slightly roiled and carried a floatage of broken twigs, torn leaves, with here and there a golden-green tulip-petal, like the broken wings of butterflies.

I was in no hurry now, in no disquietude. The swamp and the storm were at my back. Before me lay the pond, the pastures, and the roofs of a human village—all bathed in the splendor of the year's divinest hour. It had not been a perfect day, but these closing hours were perfect, so perfect that they redeemed the whole, and not that day only: they were perfect enough to have redeemed the whole of creation travailing till then in pain.

Because I turned from all this sunset glory to find out what little bird was making the very big fuss near by, and because, parting the foliage of an arrow-wood bush, I looked with exquisite pleasure into the nest of a white-eyed vireo, does it mean that I am still unborn as to soul? For some reason it was a relief to look away from that west of vast and burning color to the delicately dotted eggs in the tiny cradle—the same relief felt in descending from a mountain-

top to the valley ; in turning from the sweep of the sea to watch beach-fleas hopping over the sand ; in giving over the wisdom of men for the gabble of my little boys.

How the vireo scolded ! and her mate ! He half sang his threat and defiance. "Come, get out of this ! Come ; do you hear ?" he cried over and over, as I peeked into the nest. It was a thick-walled, exquisite bit of a basket, rimmed round with green, growing moss, worked over with shredded bark and fragments of yellow wood from a punky stump across the stream, and suspended by spider-webs upon two parallel twigs about three feet above the water. It was not consciously worked out by the birds, of course, but the patch of yellow-wood fragments on the side of the nest exactly matched the size and color of the fading cymes of arrow-wood blossoms all over the bush, so that I mistook the little domicile utterly on first parting the leaves. A crow or a snake would never have discovered it from that side.

Paddling down, I was soon out of earshot of the scolding vireos, but the little cock's vigorous, ringing song followed me to the head of the

pond. Flying heavily over from the meadows with folded neck and dangling legs came a little green heron—the “poke.” I spun round behind a big clump of elder to watch him ; but he saw me, veered, gulped aloud, and pulled off with a rapid stroke up the creek.

As I turned, my eye fell upon a soft, yellowish something in the rose-bushes across the docks. I was slow to believe. It was too good to be credited all at once. Within three paddle-lengths of my boat, in a patch of dark that must be a nest, stood my least bittern.

I sat still for several seconds, tasting the joy of my discovery and anticipating the look into the nest. Then, upon my knees in the bow of the skiff, I pulled up by means of the stout dock-leaves until almost able to touch the bird, when she walked off down a dead stalk to the ground, clucking and growling at me.

It was n't a nest to boast of ; but she might boast of her eggs, for there was more of eggs than of nest—a great deal more. A few sticks had been laid upon the ends of the bending rose-bushes, and this flimsy, inadequate platform was literally covered by the five dirty-white eggs.

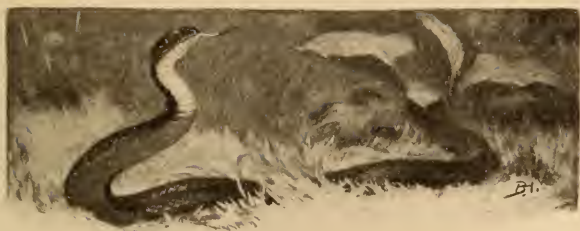
The hen had to stand on the bushes straddling the nest in order to brood. How she ever got as close to the nest as that without spilling its contents was hard to see ; for I took an egg out and had the greatest difficulty in putting it back, so little room was there, so near to nothing for it to rest upon.

Working back into the channel, I gave the skiff to the easy current and drew slowly along toward the foot of the pond.

The sun had gone down behind the hill ; the flame had faded from the sky, and over the rim of the circling slopes poured the soft, cool twilight, with a breeze as soft and cool, and a spirit that was prayer. Drifting across the pond as gently as the gray half-light fell a shower of lint from the willow catkins. The swallows had left ; but from the leafy darkness of the copse in front of me, piercing the dreamy, foamy roar of the distant dam, came the notes of a wood-thrush, pure, sweet, and peaceful, speaking the soul of the quiet time. My boat grated softly on the sandy bottom of the cove and swung in. Out from the deep shadow of the wooded shore, out over the pond, a thin white

veil was creeping—the mist, the breath of the sleeping water, the spirit of the stream. And away up the creek a distorted, inarticulate sound—the hoarse, guttural croak of the great blue heron, the weird, uncanny cry of the night, the mock, the menace of the tangled, untamed swamp !

THE DRAGON OF THE SWALE



THE DRAGON OF THE SWALE

MY path to Cubby Hollow ran along a tumbling worm-fence, down a gravelly slope, and across a strip of swale, through which flowed the stream that farther on widened into the Hollow. A small jungle of dog-roses, elder, and blackberry tangled the banks of the stream, spreading into flanks of cinnamon-fern that crept well up the hillsides.

As I descended the gravelly slope, my path led through the ferns into a tunnel of vines, to a rail over the water, and on up to the woods. By the middle of June the tangle, except by the half-broken path, was almost rabbit-proof. The

rank ferns waved to my chin, and were so thick that they left little trace of my passing until late in the summer.

This bit of the swale from the lower edge of the gravelly slope to the edge of the woods on the opposite slope was the lair of a dragon. My path cut directly across it.

Perhaps the dragon had been there ever since I had known the swale, and summer after summer had allowed me to cross unchallenged. I do not know. I only know that one day he rose out of the ferns before me — the longest, ugliest, boldest beast that ever withstood me in the quiet walks about home.

It was a day in early July, hot and very close. I was wading the sunken trail, much as one "treads water," my head not always above the surface of the fronds, when, suddenly, close to my side the ferns in a single spot were violently shaken. Instantly ahead of me they whirled again; and before I could think, off across the path was another rush and whirl — then stirless silence.

I knew what it meant. These were not the sudden, startled leaps of three animals, but the

lightning movements of one. I had crossed the path of a swamp black-snake, and judging from the speed and whirl, it was a snake of uncommon size.

The path, a few paces farther on, opened into a small patch of low grass. Just as I was getting through the brake to this spot I stopped short with a chill. In the ferns near me shrilled a hissing whistle, a weird, creepy whistle that made me cold—a fierce, menacing sound, all edge, and so thin that it slivered every nerve in me. And then, without a stir in the brake, up out of the low grass in front of me rose a blue-black, glittering head.

I have little faith in the spell of a snake's eye, yet for a moment I was held by the subtle, masterful face that had risen so unexpectedly, so coolly before me. It was lifted a foot out of the grass. The head upon its lithe, round neck was poised motionless, but set as with a hair-spring. The flat, pointed face was turned upon me, so that I could see a patch of white upon the throat. Evidently the snake had just sloughed an old skin, for the sunlight gleamed iridescent on the shining jet scales. It was not a large head; it

lacked the shovel-nose and the heavy, horrid jaws of the rattle-snake. But it was clean-cut, with power in every line of jaw and neck ; with power and speed and certainty in the pose, so easy, ready, and erect. There was no fear in the creature's eye, something rather of aggressiveness, and of such evil cunning that I stood on guard.

Afraid of a snake? of a black-snake? No. I think, indeed, there are few persons who really do fear snakes. It is not fear, but nerves. I have tamed more black-snakes than I have killed. I should not care a straw if one bit me. Yet, for all of that, the meeting with any black-snake is so unlooked for as always to be unnerving. But let a huge one whip about you in the brake, chill you with an unearthly hissing whistle, then suddenly rise in front of you, glittering, challenging, sinister! You will be abashed. I was ; and I shall never outgrow the weakness.

It was a big snake. I had not been mistaken in its size. There is nothing on earth that shrinks as a *dead* snake ; and this one, so far as I know, is still alive ; yet, allowing generously for

my imagination, I am sure the creature measured six feet. His neck, just behind the jaws, was nearly the size of a broom-handle, which meant a long, hard length curved out in the ferns behind. It was a male ; I could tell by the peculiar musk on the air, an odor like cut cucumbers.

Fully a minute we eyed each other. Then I took a step forward. The glittering head rose higher. Off in the ferns there beat a warning tattoo — the loud whir of the snake's tail against a skunk-cabbage leaf.

In my hand was a slender dogwood switch that I had been poking into the holes of the digger-wasps up the hillside. If one thing more than another will turn a snake tail to in a hurry it is the song of a switch. Expecting to see this overbold fellow jump out of his new skin and lunge off into the swale, I leaned forward and made the stick sing under his nose. But he did not jump or budge. He only bent back out of range, swayed from side to side, and drew more of his black length out into the low grass to better his position.

The lidless eyes and scale-cased face of a snake might seem incapable of more than one set

expression. Can hate and fear show there? They certainly can, at least to my imagination. If ever hate and fear mantled a face, they did this one in the grass. The sound of the switch only maddened the creature. He had too long dictated terms in this part of the swale to crawl aside for me.

Nor would I give way to him. But I ceased switching, drew back a step, and looked at him with more respect than I ever before showed a snake.

The curved neck straightened at that, the glinting head swayed forward, and shivering through me as the swish of a stick never shivered through a snake, sounded that unearthly hissing whistle. For a second — for just the fraction of a second that it takes to jump — I was, not scared, but shocked ; and I slipped on something underfoot. In three directions I wallowed the ferns before I got to my feet to watch the snake again, and by that time the snake was gone.

I found myself somewhat muddy and breathing a little hard ; but I was not wholly chagrined. I had heard and seen a black-snake whistle. I had never even known of the habit before.

Since then I have seen one other snake do it, and I think I have heard the sound three or four times. It is almost indescribable. The jaws were closed as it was made, not even the throat moving, that I could see. The air seemed to be blown violently through the nostrils, though sounding as if driven through the teeth—a shrilling hiss, fine and piercing, which one not so much hears as feels, crisping cold along his nerves.

It may seem strange, but I believe this whistle is a mating-call. Even the forked tongue (or maybe the nose) of a snake grows vocal with love. If only the Sphinx had not possessed a heart of stone! No matter about its lips; with a heart to know the “spring running” we should have heard its story long ago. Perhaps, after all, the college sophomore was not mixing his observations and Sunday-school memories when he wrote, describing the dawn of a spring morning (I quote from his essay): “Beneath in the water the little fishes darted about the boat; above the little birds twittered in the branches; while off on a sunny log in the pond the soft, sibilant croak of the mud-turtle was

heard on the shore." If we could happen upon the mud-turtle mad with love, I am sure we should find that he had a voice—a "soft, sibilant croak," who knows?

I had long known the tradition among the farmers of the black-snake's trailing its mate, following her by scent through grass and brush, persistent and sure as a sleuth-hound, until at last she is won. I had been told of this by eye-witnesses over and over, but I had always put it down as a snake story, for these same witnesses would also tell me the hoop-snake story, only it was their grandfathers, always, who had seen this creature take its tail in its mouth and roll, and hit and kill a fifty-dollar apple-tree (the tree was invariably worth fifty dollars). I had small faith in the trailing tale.

One day, the summer after my encounter in the ferns, I was sitting upon a harrow at the edge of the gravelly field that slopes to the swale, when a large black-snake glided swiftly across the lane and disappeared in the grass beyond. It had been gone perhaps a minute, when I heard another stir behind me, and turning, saw high above the weeds and dewberry-

vines the neck and head of a second black-snake.

He was coming swiftly, evenly, carrying his gleaming head over a foot from the ground, and following hard upon the trail of the first snake. He hit very near the smooth, flowing mark in the dust of the lane. Here she had crossed. Here he was about to cross when he caught sight of me.

For a startled instant he stiffened, threw himself on the defensive, and showed a white patch under his chin, an ugly, blazing light in his eye, and a peculiarly aggressive attitude that there was no mistaking. I had seen this snake before. I knew him. He was the dragon of the swale.

Only pausing, he whirled, struck the track, and sped on, his round black body stretching from rut to rut of the lane. A hundred feet beyond in the grass I saw his glittering head rise and sway with a swimming motion as he trailed the long, lithe beauty that was leading him this lightning race across the fields.

This was not the last time he crossed my path. He never withstood me again; but he thwarted me several times. Once as I was descending the

slope I saw him gliding down from a low cedar. The distressing cries of two chippies told me what he had been doing in the tree ; I did not need to look at the half-dislodged nest. Then and there I vowed to kill him, but from that moment I never set eyes on him again. His evil work, however, went on. In a clump of briars across the stream was the nest of a pair of redbirds that I was watching. One day just before the young could fly they were carried off. I knew who did it. On the same side, up under the fence by the woods, a litter of rabbits was destroyed. The snake killed them. It was he, too, who ate the eggs of the bluebirds in the old apple-tree along the fence in the adjoining field.

There must be a dragon in the way, I suppose—in the way even of nature study. There are unpleasant, perhaps unnecessary, and evil creatures—snakes!—in the fields and woods, which we must be willing to meet and tolerate for the love within us. Tick-seeds, beggar-needles, mud, mosquitos, rain, heat, hawks, and snakes haunt all our paths, hindering us sometimes, though never really blocking the way.

But the dragon in the swale—ought I to tolerate him? No. There are moments when I should be glad to kill him, yet I doubt if the swale would be quite so wild and thrilling a spot if I knew there was no dragon to meet me as I crossed. But the redbirds, bluebirds, rabbits? I see no shrinking in their numbers because of the snake. A few of them breed as they always have along the swale. There are worse enemies than the dragon, though he is bad enough.

TICKLE-BIRDS AND THE COCCINELLIDÆ



TICKLE-BIRDS AND THE COCCINELLIDÆ

I

IN a town where untrained observation rages, so the story goes, an elderly lady met an acquaintance in a shady avenue and asked her :

“ Do you know anything about birds ? ”

“ No,” said the other ; “ I ’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“ Sorry ! Oh, you ’re such a relief ! I just met Mrs. C., and she grasped my hand, gazed upward, and exclaimed : ‘ Oh, did you hear that perfectly lovely spike-beaked, purple-eyed tickle-bird ? ’ ”

“I had n’t gone a block before I met Mrs. K. ‘Hush!’ she said ecstatically. ‘Don’t move a muscle! Right up there on that branch is one of those rare, exquisite, speckle-winged, ring-tailed screamers.’

“You and I seem to be the only sane people left.”

I happen to know the above Mrs. C. and Mrs. K. personally. I meet them everywhere. When they are not listening to the purple-eyed tickle-bird, they are whispering “Twinkle twinkle” to the stars, or calling, as they pace the beach, “Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean.” They love the out-of-doors. They exclaim over nature with the lips of all the poets. They adore her! All the time they go about looking for wonderful purple-eyed tickle-birds and screamers, listening for wind voices, feeling for wave pulses, and dreaming, forever dreaming, of how happy the morning stars must be that they sing together.

All of which is good. An excellent thing it is to have a turn of rapture now and again. Nature herself will have one occasionally—in

June. But chronic ecstasy, the extreme and not uncommon type of the afore-mentioned ladies, is a disease, a mental, a moral disease indeed, which must be cured before we can understand and really love the out-of-doors. Nature hates cant.

We need to hear old Triton's wreathed horn—the oftener the better. The world of things, mere things, is still very much with us. We are in no danger from overmuch poetry. The trouble with the tickle-bird-screamer persons is not that they find too much poetry in nature, but that they really find none at all. For they do not look in the right place for it. Poetry is not in birds and sunsets and moonlight,—not in things,—but, like the kingdom of heaven and other things divine, it is in us, in ourselves. It is a mistake to go about, like Orlando and Mrs. C., sticking poems, the poets' poems, over earth and sea and sky, imagining that this is loving nature, that this is knowing the out-of-doors.

How shall we see mice in the grass or hear toads in the puddles with our heads cloud-wreathed and our spirits afloat in the ether beyond the stars? Who wants to see mice or hear toads? Not Mrs. C., nor Mrs. K., nor many of

the rest of us, for what we feel is necessary, when loosed in the fields and woods, is to have those blank misgivings of the creature that moved about in worlds not realized. We have them, too, many of them, and exceedingly blank ones.

Misgivings, of course, the naturalist will have. But he never hunts for them, not the blank species anyway. Nor does the poet. We think of Coleridge and Wordsworth tramping the Quantock Hills together seeking ecstasies and verses as we should seek heather and daisies. Far from it. A poet rarely has his raptures out-of-doors; and he never runs one down. He roams the hills, seeing *things*. When he returns and begins to *think* about them, *then* he drinks the divine draught.

I gazed — and gazed — but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought,

says the poet, then adds :

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

The poet and the naturalist seldom soar into heaven when the open sky is directly over them. They ride a centaur out-of-doors. They keep Pegasus stalled in the study.

Every close, sympathetic observer of nature ought to hope and patiently work for those rare moments of wide, free vision when he stands upon the heights, when the veil of distance falls, shrouding all with largeness, mystery, and beauty. It is his right to

Clasp the crag with crooked hands
Close to the sun in lonely lands,

as truly as the eagle's. Only he must not roost and nest there. Such visions are vouchsafed occasionally to prophets, poets, and at long intervals to naturalists and to common men. Pisgah came but once to Moses, though his pathway ran forty years through the wilderness. We shall stand on Pisgah—but not until we have wandered awhile in the Plains of Moab.

And what other way is there to Pisgah? The only preparation of soul for the grand in nature is the study of the small and the near at hand. We must reckon infinite things in terms finite—

the Matterhorn by the hill in the old home pasture.

I chanced to be on the summit of Mount Washington when the tickle-bird-screamer ladies arrived there. They came, as usual, with their thoughts trailing the edges of the universe, and climbed the mountain, as I knew they would, on the crazy, snorting little engine, stepping at once from the car into a world above the clouds. Better that way than never to stand upon the top at all. The railroad is a boon to the aged, the weak-headed, and all with uncertain hearts. But for the healthy, the vigorous, for all who want to pray up there, the only road is the path through the spruce to Hermit Lake, and up over the Head Wall of Tuckerman's Ravine.

There is no preparation for the summit like the struggle through those narrow forest defiles and the climb over the grim Head Wall, and, just short of the peak, the sight of a tiny sandwort in the Alpine Garden on the edge of the rent, rocky height.

If infinite majesty rolls in upon the soul from the mountain-peak, no less does infinite beauty breathe from the little blossom plucked on our

ascent. One who can climb the mountain blind to the revelation, unaware of the mystery in the humblest flower-cup, has no eyes for the far-rolling mightiness of peak and plain and un-blurred boundary of sky revolving round him on the summit.

But it takes a trained eye to see the sand-wort, while any eye not totally blind can shift about in its socket and make out mountains from the top of Washington.

The tickle-bird-screamer naturalists have a mere passing, fashionable madness. It came suddenly one day, during a parlor lecture on birds ; it will go away with the next dog-show.

Such lovers are none the worse for their passion ; only they never come to know the out-of-doors. Poetry, lectures, nature-books are for them, and museums of stuffed, made things. The out-of-doors requires too much patience, alertness, insight, and sincerity.

II

As they sat on the porch, so this story goes, the school trustee casually called attention to a

familiar little orange-colored bug, with black spots on its back, that was crawling on the floor.

"I s'pose you know what that is?" he said.

"Yes," replied the applicant, with conviction; "that is a *Coccinella septempunctata*."

"Young man," was the rejoinder, "a feller as don't know a ladybug when he sees it can't get my vote for teacher in this deestric."

Now it happens that I also know the young school-teacher of the above story. Indeed, I fall in with him oftener than with either Mrs. C. or Mrs. K. of the tickle-birds. He is college-bred. He observes nature "scientifically," he says. He knows what he knows, namely, that *Coccinella septempunctata* is *septempunctata* and not *novemnotata*. All he knows (and what else is there to know?) is *septempunctata* and *novemnotata*—the names of things, the places, parts, laws, and theories of things. He is the text-book naturalist.

We have been afield together a few times, but I was never able to interest or surprise him, because there were no surprises left: he knew everything. He had dissected every flower,

measured every bird, stuck a pin through every butterfly; he had a glacial theory for every pebble, a chemical theory for every glow-worm, and a pile of science for the color of the autumn leaves which made way with every fleck of their glory.

The trustee was right: the young man was not fit for a teacher. He had memorized *Coccinella septempunctata*, but he did not *know* the ladybug.

Among my acquaintances are three nature-students of this family *Coccinellidæ*, all of whom are teachers. One of these used to go into the woods carrying long lists of scientific names of flowers written out on paper, which he conned by the way. Along a familiar stretch of road, across a plowed field, out came the roll of names, and he would mumble: "*Pogonia ophioglossoides*, *Pogonia ophioglossoides*, *ophioglossoides*, *ophiog*—" never seeing the waves chasing each other across the heavy-headed wheat.

Of all the flowers beautiful, rare, and sweet, his favorite, I think, was the everlasting, for he said to me one day, with a show of real interest, "The everlasting has the longest Latin name by two letters of any flower I have analyzed."

The second student : He never told me how it happened ; whether he had been reading poetry, had been advised by his doctor to get out-of-doors, or had simply found himself without a hobby. Anyhow, one winter night he determined that he would study birds. He waited until morning, then started for Philadelphia, where he bought all the bird-books he could find.

I shall never forget the beautiful light on his face as he told me the exact amount, to the cent, that the enormous pile of volumes cost him.

He put the literature all away until June,—until things were ablare with bird-song,—then took himself and his library to Tuckahoe, the birdiest spot in New Jersey, and there began.

This trip in June became a habit. One autumn I met him in the city. “How did the birding go last summer?” I inquired.

“Slow, slow,” he replied. “Did n’t do much. *But—*” with an emphasis that surely meant he had seen the ivory-billed woodpecker or the great auk—“*but* I paid expressage to Tuckahoe on sixty-seven pounds of bird-books !”

Number three is a woman, and naturally less

moderate than either of the men. The most scientific thing in this wide world is a scientific woman. The discovery of a new plant in this woman's out-of-doors is like the finding of a new pain or symptom of disease in her body. She hurries to the doctors to have it identified, utterly unhappy until they have told her its name. I have known her to travel twenty-five miles with a little watery, worthless mushroom in the hope of finding it *Mycena galericulata* or *M. parabolica*—or something, it did n't matter what. Her opera-glasses lie focused, ready. A bird chirps among the trees. She snatches the glasses, rushes out, then rushes in, exclaiming: "It flew over the garden: a streak of black—a patch of yellow—a short tail. A new one, I do believe! It 'll make the hundred and tenth to my list."

Once a thing is labeled, what more? She loves the out-of-doors, yearns over it; yearns to bring things and their Latin names together. How she would have enjoyed Adam's place—having the animals file past her to get their names! The joy of bending low at the approach of the little orange-colored bug with black spots on its back, and saying: "Your name, miss?"

You are *Coccinella septempunctata*. And you?" —to her sister ladybug—"You are *Coccinella*, also, but you are *novemnotata*." The joy of it! And something of that joy is hers, for she has a nature-study class at a young ladies' seminary.

I hardly know which state of mind is farther from the mind of the true nature-lover—the ecstatic, exclamatory one, that goes chanting rimes and verses like priests and spring poets, or the analytical, labeling mind, that scours the country with a book, finding out what Linnæus, Audubon, and Gray called things.

Of course the lover of the out-of-doors wants to know—even know that the ladybug is *Coccinella septempunctata*; but classifying the world of field and wood is only the beginning of knowledge. How, for instance, does the fact that the dandelion is *Taraxacum officinale* compare with the discovery of its shining face in the cold, wet death of some February roadside, or the finding of its hoary hairs in the lining of a chebec's nest? And to the exclamatory, all-worshipping ones what mean the loving lines:

Dear common flower that grow'st beside the way,
Fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,

if these worshipers never plucked the flower
beside a dusty road? if they never felt May-
time open in their hearts at sight of it? if no
memories of

Meadows where in sun the cattle graze,
Where, as the breezes pass,
The gleaming rushes lean a thousand ways,

come to them as they pass it by?

The true nature-lover knows at least a little,
and keeps learning all the time ; he goes afield
the seasons through ; he sees accurately, reports
honestly, interprets humanly, and loves sin-
cerely.

THE CRAZY FLICKER



THE CRAZY FLICKER

MR. BURROUGHS somewhere has said that if ever a flicker goes crazy, he will go crazy boring holes. I never doubt anything Mr. Burroughs says about birds and beasts, and so for a good many years I have confidently expected that when I found a crazy flicker I should find him, as Mr. Burroughs predicted, boring holes.

Of course I never went armed with gun or glass, expecting to meet a real crazy, mad-house flicker, though I have long been convinced that the whole flicker family is queer and, indeed, somewhat crack-brained. But there are crazy flickers, and at last I am able to report the cases

of two—two that bored holes in barns and tin rain-pipes, for the fiends possessed them.

Out in the broad grain-fields near my home, a farmer built a large barn. It was tight, well-shingled, and sided with white pine-boards that lapped at the edges, so that not a streak of daylight crept in anywhere.

It was early spring. One day shortly after the barn was finished, and while it was still empty, a flicker lighted upon the ridge-pole and hammered. She (I am not sure of the sex in either of the cases) jumped into the air at the first rap. How it sounded! Never before had she struck anything with such a ring to it. What a glorious hole for a nest there must be in there! Why, if the brood should happen to come twenty strong (which was not past hoping for), each young one could have a bed and a room all to himself—a condition of affairs altogether unheard of, up to this time, in flickerdom.

Now I saw the flicker when she discovered this barn, and while I must say that she did not utter one of these exclamations, yet I do believe she thought them all, for she instantly set to hunting for a good place at which to begin boring.

All of this was sane enough from the flicker point of view. She was not a very experienced bird certainly, or she would have known the size of the rumbling cavern beneath ; yet many another flicker has had to dig through in order to learn.

Next to the thud of soft punky wood—which means fat grubs—the ring of hollow wood with a thin hard shell is most musical to a flicker's ears, for this is the sound of a good nesting-place. The flicker is very much of a family bird.

The roof of the barn did not suit. It is not natural for a flicker to stand like ordinary beings and work ; so she flew round to an end of the barn where she could hang on to the perpendicular siding, bracing herself by her spine-pointed tail. Choosing a spot here at the lapping of two boards, she diligently began.

I wish I could have seen the expression on her face and read her thoughts when she got through and found herself inside an empty barn. She must have been the most amazed and mystified bird in the region, if she was sane enough to think at all. Instead of a neat, snug cavity sufficient to turn round in, she had bored into

an empty hay-loft. Perhaps an English sparrow would not have been daunted at the prospect of filling up a haymow with a nest, but the flicker was.

Or else she was not house-hunting, as I first thought, but simply a demented flicker, crazy over holes. For now her madness showed itself. Out she came, hopped sidewise across a few boards, tapped, listened, and began a new hole. This, of course, opened into the same mammoth cave. What of it? Not where the hole opened, but the boring of it; that was the thing. So, hopping along to another seam, she went through again.

And not three times only. Day after day either she or the other flickers in the neighborhood kept boring away, until soon the barn became riddled with holes as if it had received a severe cannonading.

It was all very interesting for the naturalist. The farmer, however, who had not built the barn for the amusement of insane birds, saw no good in the holes at all.

Of like mind with the farmer were the owners of some fine houses in a town not far from me.

Here the holes were drilled into the rain-pipes. I did not see the insane bird this time, but a naturalist friend who did reported it a male that had gone mad with love.

The bird came back early in the spring, and announced himself by beating a thunderous tattoo on a galvanized-iron chimney. The persons in the rooms below jumped as if the roof were falling. The passers-by on the street halted to gaze around in wonder. There was nothing to be seen. Again the rattling, ringing roll, and up out of the chimney popped the flicker, in an ecstasy over his new drum—his “Spanish guitar,” for he was certainly calling a mate, though not another flicker had yet returned.

Then across the way, on the top of a neighboring house, he spied another, larger drum, and galloped over there. It was a big ventilator. He hit it, and it boomed. Catching his toes around an iron hoop that circled it, he began to beat a roll to wake the very dead.

The mystery is that his bill did not fly into splinters. But it did not. The sound, however, went to his head. He got stark mad with the

noise, crazier and crazier over galvanized iron, until he went to boring holes into the rain-pipe.

At the first it was love, doubtless, that ailed him ; he was drumming up a bride. But that his tender passion soon changed to an insane delight in his own wonderful self is very evident. He grew enamoured of his drumming. Nor is he the first male bird I have known thus in love. In the island park at Detroit, Michigan, I knew a red-headed woodpecker to serenade himself long after the mating season — up, in fact, to September, the time I left the park woods. He would get inside the zinc ventilator of the clubhouse and make the island ring.

It was several days after his arrival before this second crazy flicker attacked the rain-pipes. Up to that time the observers in the neighborhood had looked upon him as a harmless, ardent lover who could not express half his feeling upon an ordinary rotten stub, and so had taken to the hollow-sounding chimneys. They were amused.

Suddenly that all changed. They had wakened to the fact that the bird was a raving maniac ; for what did they see one morning but the flicker high up under the corner of the roof,

clutching a small iron bracket in the side of the house, and drilling a hole through the rain-pipe !

He was hammering like a tinsmith, and already, when discovered, had cut a hole half as big as one's fist. He had not tried to drill before ; he had been happy with the sound. Something, however, either the size, shape, or ring of the pipe, suggested "holes" to his wild wits, and right through the pipe he had gone.

It was not grubs that he was after. Maybe somewhere in his mad head was the remote notion of a nest. Where, however, could he have found a mate as crazy as himself—crazy enough to have built in such a place? Young Mrs. Flicker is an exceedingly spoony bride ; love in a cottage is just to her liking ; but I have yet to see one who would go to the length of a rain-pipe.

The crazy bird was finally scared away, leaving several indignant citizens behind, who heartily wished they had taken the law into their hands and slain him as a menace to the commonwealth.

SOME FRIENDLY BIRDS



SOME FRIENDLY BIRDS

WE have all heard the pack chanting :
Now this is the law of the jungle—as old and
as true as the sky ;
And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the
Wolf that shall break it must die.
As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk, the Law
runneth forward and back—
For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the
strength of the Wolf is the Pack.

We have seen the law at work in herd and
drove, in school and flock, and everywhere it is
the great law of necessity—obey or die. It
obtains among men as well as among beasts and
birds. But the man-pack has broken, because
we are no longer mere wolves, and a higher law

obtains. We have scattered as a pack and reformed as a community—a friendly mingling of pack and herd and school and flock.

Nothing like this has happened to any great extent among the birds and beasts, for the new earth has not yet come; but many interesting individual friendships have been recorded, to which every close observer of the out-of-doors can add a few.

Allowance must always be made for false seeing and the temperament of the observer. One's interpretations are matters of nature and—of constitution sometimes. The facts I must see with the eyes of my neighbor; the meaning of the facts I can see with no one's eyes but my own. The following observations I believe are just as you would have made them; their interpretation is my own and may not agree with yours at all.

One of my friends, a keen and trustworthy naturalist, found recently that a pair of cat-birds were building a nest in the thick tangle of vines just outside her dining-room window. She soon noticed that the pair of robins who had eggs in a neighboring apple-tree showed

extraordinary interest in the work of the catbirds. The conduct of the robins was very unusual, and the woman began to watch.

Evidently, according to robin standards, something about the new nest was wrong, something that ought to be changed over robinwise. The catbirds were not building just right. They were a young couple, doubtless ; this was their first nest, and the robins, who had built scores of nests, looked on critically, compassionately, and with a desire to advise that was almost killing them.

The work went on for a day or two. Then it chanced that both catbirds flew off together for more building-material. The robins were watching. They could hold out no longer. Taking a hasty look around to make sure that their young neighbors were quite gone, one of the robins (the woman in the window was too astonished to note which) dropped to the ground, picked up a piece of coarse grass, and hurried to the half-finished nest. Stepping quickly in, she (it must have been "she ") laid the straw along the rim of the clumsy nest, and, cuddling down inside, drew the ragged walls up to her round, shapely breast to mold them into something like form.

It is almost too human a story to be true. But I believe it to be true, though I never saw anything among the birds quite equal to it.

The catbirds soon returned with some fine rootlets, and did not seem to notice a robin, with head cocked, eying them from a corner of the grape-arbor.

If this was not a manifestation of friendship, it surely was of good will—the kind of good will, I must admit, that among us humans is not always appreciated.

One can hardly imagine such a thing as mutual benefit, to say nothing of friendship, in the common home life of fish-hawks, crow-blackbirds, and English sparrows. The blackbirds and hawks might get on together, but what saint among the birds could live with an English sparrow—could be friendly with him? Yet the fish-hawks' nest along the Delaware Bay which I have spoken of in a previous chapter harbors, besides the hawks, a small community of crow-blackbirds and (at my last visit) two families of English sparrows.

This huge nest, planted firmly upon the very top of a tall oak, standing almost alone on the

edge of a vast salt-marsh, is not the natural nesting-place for blackbirds and sparrows. This marsh-land is the range of the hawks. They are at home here. The blackbirds and sparrows, for some reason, have broken away from the inland. The blackbirds have nested here, to my knowledge, for thirteen years ; the sparrows discovered the great nest only a year ago.

The walls of the nest are as big around as a hogshead and as rough as the protruding ends of corn-stalks, dead limbs, and small cord-wood can make them. It is around in the crevices of these uneven walls that the blackbirds and sparrows lodge their nests.

I am by no means certain that all is harmonious in this queer colony. There was no appearance of discord—none but the appearance of the sparrows. Neither am I sure why these small birds choose to live thus with the hawks. They are both independent birds, not hangers-on at all ; so it cannot be the mere convenience of a ready-made nesting-site. That could be had anywhere ; besides, naturally, neither grackles nor sparrows would fly far away into a marsh in looking for a place to build. It cannot be that they come

for the bits of fish left after the young hawks have eaten. They are not particularly fond of fish, and there would not be crumbs enough to make their coming worth while, anyway.

I believe the blackbirds are like certain strange persons : they enjoy living in a tenement. There are extraordinary neighborhood advantages in a big, round hawk's nest—fine chances for company and gossip. The sparrows found the grackles living here and saw a fine chance to intrude.

But this is not generous nor even fair. Is it not just as easy and as safe to put it all on the score of friendly interest and good-fellowship? I can believe that the hawks enjoy the cheerful clatter of the garrulous crow-blacks and the small impertinence of the sparrows. On the other hand, the crow-blacks and sparrows feel a certain protection in the presence of the hawks, and may, who knows, appreciate the friendship of such high and mighty folk.

Quite as interesting and unusual a show of friendship, at least of friendliness, was seen recently by bird-lovers on a telephone-pole in a thickly settled town not far from Boston.

There were poles in plenty sticking up all

over the surrounding country ; but passing by all of these, a pair of flickers, a pair of chickadees, and a pair of red-headed woodpeckers (*erythrocephalus*) selected the same pole for their nests, prepared their holes, hatched and brought up their large, noisy families together, without a single quarrel so far as the curious public knew. And they did all this with persons coming from far and near to stare at them through opera-glasses, for the red-headed woodpeckers were the only pair with such heads reported that season anywhere around.

Some day the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, which, of course, is much more of a wonder than the kingbird's dwelling peaceably with the orchard-oriole. But this, in its way, is no mean wonder.

I was rowing up a little creek one day when I found a kingbird's nest in the low, drooping branch of a red maple, swinging within three feet of the water. The moment the kingbirds saw me back water they knew I had discovered their nest, and across the creek they started on the four maddest wings. How they quivered ! The kingbirds never seem exactly placid ; but

let Mrs. Kingbird catch you fooling around her nest !

However, it was here in the maple that day that I had a fresh glimpse into the heart of this little-loved bird. He is not so quarrelsome and ill-natured under his feathers as he appears. He is splintery, but neighborly withal.

While I was holding to his nest-bough, the skiff swung in and wedged its nose between the forks of another limb that dragged the water. Turning to get free, I put my hand fairly upon a second nest—the dainty cradle of an orchard-oriole. The two nests were not five feet apart.

Kingbird and oriole friendly? It is hard to imagine two birds with respectable bird ways so ill assorted for neighbors as these two. Rather is it hard to think of kingbirds living in peace anywhere or with anybody.

The difference in the natures of the two birds was strikingly exhibited in the style of these two nests. The kingbird has n't a particle of imagination, not an atom of the artistic in his soul. His shape, dress, and voice declare it. He is hard-headed, straightforward, and serious, somewhat overbearing, perhaps, and testy, but

businesslike and refined in all his tastes. His nest is himself over again: strong, plain, adequate, but, like its builder, refined. Contrast the oriole's. Romance, poetry, and that indescribable touch—the light, easy, negligent touch of the artist—in every line of it. Why, the thing was actually woven of new-mown hay—as if one should build his house of sandalwood—with all the scent of the hay-field about it. I put my nose near and took a deep, delicious breath.

The birds had selected and cut the grass themselves and worked it in while green. Some of it was still uncured, still soft and sweet with sap. One side, exposed to the sun through a leaf rift, had gone a golden yellow; but the other side, deeply shaded the day through, was yet green and making more slowly under the leaves. And this nest was woven, not built up like the kingbird's; it was hung, not saddled upon the limb—suspended from the slenderest of forks, so that every little breeze would rock it. And so loosely woven, so deftly, slightly tied!

There must have been a friendly understand-

ing between the two birds. If kingbird were as ugly a neighbor as some that my friends have heard of, the oriole could not have had the heart to perch upon that maple's top—the common front step to their double house—and sing down into his own and the kingbird's home. Yet, up there that moment he sat, utterly care-free, abandoned to happiness, the great maple-tree adrip with his limpid, liquid song.

A state of things farther removed from a chronic neighborhood quarrel, more like genuine friendship, it would be hard anywhere to find. One may certainly be allowed to believe in a friendly agreement between the two birds, to wit: that oriole provide music for the two families, while kingbird guard the premises. Whether the agreement was formally come to or not (and of course it was not), this is exactly what was doing, the fighting for both being attended to by the cantankerous kingbird, and the oriole furnishing all the song.

“THE LONGEST WAY ROUND”



“THE LONGEST WAY ROUND”

FROSTY weather and ripe persimmons had come, with Thanksgiving close at hand. Uncle Jethro and I were husking corn.

“What had you rather have for Thanksgiving, Uncle Jeth,” I asked, “one of Horner’s big bronze gobblers or a nice young gander?”

The old darky paused, dropped his ear of corn from a paralyzed hand, and looked me over with annihilating scorn.

“Gobbler ! gander ! Dat—dat w’at I calls de las’ ac’. Dat am de egregioucest misappreciation of circumstance an’ de proprieties w’at ’s occurred to my personal cognition, sure ! Dar am

jes one time in de yhear fer no udder kin' of meat but possum, an' dat time, boy, am de time ter gib thanks."

Though not exactly sure of the precise meaning of Uncle Jethro's words, I was duly apologetic, and instant with my promise to bring forth a big, fat possum for his Thanksgiving dinner.

We had finished the shock and I had gone ahead, broken the binding on the next one and pushed it over, while Uncle Jethro was kicking the stray ears into the pile.

As the stalks tumbled I looked down to see the mice run, when, to my astonishment, I saw, curled up in a bed of corn-blades, an enormous possum. He had taken the shock of stalks for his winter home, and made his nest at its very center, snug and warm and weather-proof.

He half uncurled, yawned, and blinked as the glaring light burst upon him, but showed no sign of surprise nor evinced the least intention of getting up. It was very inconvenient, distressing indeed, to have one's house pulled down like this. Would n't I be gentleman enough to spare him his bed?

“Uncle Jeth!” I called, as calmly as I knew how. “Uncle Jeth, would you mind if I brought you that possum to-day?”

“Mind, chil’, mind?” he chuckled. “Ol’ Jethro shuttin’ his doo’ on Br’er Possum? Fetch him up, honey, fetch him up. Jethro gwine take him in.”

“Well, how will this one do?” I exclaimed, catching the possum with a quick grab by the tail and lifting him up fairly under the old man’s nose.

“De golden chariot am a-comin’!” gasped Uncle Jethro, jumping back, his unbelieving eyes bulging half out of his head. “W’at dat, yo’ chil’, yo’! Possum! De quails an’ de manna an’ de water in de rock! Yo’ ’s de beat-enes’, yo’ is. Yo’ ’s done been talkin’ wid ol’ Miss Owl las’ night, dat w’at yo’ has.”

But I stoutly denied this imputation. I had not been hunting the night before and hidden the possum here in order to surprise Uncle Jethro, as he saw immediately on examining the creature’s bed.

The great fat fellow had slept in that bed more than one night, more than a month of

nights, in all probability. And here the shock stood within a quarter of a mile of the house, and directly along our beaten path to the woods. Fifty times, at least, the dog had passed this shock, had run round it, had sniffed at it, doubtless, and gone on, while the possum slept peacefully inside.

How?

Who knows the hows of possum ways? All that Uncle Jethro himself is sure of with regard to possum is that by Thanksgiving-time there is nothing in the market to approach it for a roast. You can trust Uncle Jethro's observations on this point.

But how did the possum succeed in establishing himself along the path and so near the house, where, except for this accident to his shock, which the longest-headed possum could not have foreseen, he might have lived indefinitely? How? In this way, partly: This corn-shock that he had chosen was peculiar. Unlike any other in the field, it stood close along an old worm-fence and in such a position that one of the long cross-stakes used for a post slanted out over its top.

Now a rabbit cannot walk the top rail of a fence, nor climb out to the tip of a tall slanting pole. But a possum can. A rabbit would have to creep under the shock from the bottom, going in on the ground. A possum, however, would not have to do that way. He could walk the fence, climb out on the slanting stake, drop to the top of the shock, and go straight down through the middle.

And that is exactly what this possum did. He came out the way he went in, too, never leaving his track on the ground near the nest, nor his scent where a dog could find it. He may not have known that dogs cannot walk fences and climb poles. Perhaps not. But he knew two things, stupid as he looked : one was that a good and sure road home lay atop the rail fence ; the other, that a pretty safe way to hang out his latch-string was through the chimney.

Yet perhaps this was only a cunning blunder, and not real woods-wisdom at all ; for it is difficult to believe in the mentality of so much fat and a chronic smile. One is not surprised at a coon's taking "the longest way round"—the way of the top rail ; but that a sleepy, logy

possum should discover it to be "the surest way home" comes as a real surprise.

I am inclined to think it was a blunder. He happened to walk the fence, climb the stake, and tumble off into a soft spot. And if once, why not again? For let a notion get into a possum's head, and there it will stick. You can't get it out, nor get another one in; there is n't room.

As an illustration take the case of "Pinky," a little possum we once possessed, who had a notion that he wanted to be domesticated.

Most wild animals stoutly resist all of our well-intentioned efforts to bring them up in dooryard ways, and take to the woods again at the first opportunity. I have tried one after another, but every one of them sooner or later has escaped to the wilds — every one but Pinky. He refused to stay in the woods even when taken back there, because, forsooth, into the little think-hole in his head had got stuck the notion that he wanted to be a domesticated possum, and that notion could not be budged.

Pinky was one of a family of nine that I caught several springs ago and carried home. In the course of a few weeks eight of them were adopted

by admiring friends ; but Pinky, because he was the runt and looked very sorry and forlorn, was not chosen. He was left with me. I kept him,—his mother had choked to death on a fish-bone,—and fed him milk until he caught up to the size of the biggest mother-fed possum of his age in the woods. Then I took him down to the old stump in the brier-patch where he was born, and left him to shift for himself.

Being thrown into a brier-patch was exactly what tickled Br'er Rabbit half to death ; and any one would have supposed that being put *gently* down in his home brier-patch would have tickled this little possum even more.

Not he ! I went home and forgot him. But the next morning, when breakfast was preparing, whom should we see but Pinky, curled up in the feather cushion of the kitchen settee, sound asleep.

He had found his way back during the night, had climbed in through the trough of the pump-box, and had gone to sleep like the rest of the family. He gaped and grinned and looked about him when awakened, altogether at home, and really surprised that morning had come so soon.

He got down and took his saucer of milk under the stove as if nothing unusual had happened.

We had had a good many possums, crows, lizards, and the like ; so, in spite of this winsome show of confidence and affection, Pinky was borne away once more to the briers.

That night he did not creep in by the pump-box trough. Nothing was seen of him, and he passed quickly out of our minds. But he still kept his notion. Two or three days after this, as I was crossing the back yard, I stopped to pick up a large calabash-gourd that I had left on the woodpile. I had cut a round hole in the gourd somewhat larger than a silver dollar, intending to fasten the thing up for the bluebirds to nest in.

It ought to have been as light as so much air, almost, but instead it was heavy—the children had filled it with sand, no doubt. I turned it over and looked into the hole, and lo ! not sand, but Pinky !

The notion had brought him back again. How he ever managed to squeeze through the opening, I don't know ; but there he was, sleeping away as soundly as ever.

He no longer possessed the notion ; the notion

possessed him. And what happened finally? A sad thing, of course. A creature with such a head on his shoulders could not come to a fine and happy end.

I took Pinky back to the woods the third time, and the third time he returned, but blundered into a neighbor's yard, and—and a little later he was drawn up in a bucket of water from the bottom of that neighbor's well, still asleep, only—they could not wake him up.

It is not easy to reconcile such wit as this with the cunning of the fence-rail road and the chimney entrance. Yet this one of the corn-shock is not the only possum I have known to take a roundabout way home for the sake of hiding his trail. One autumn I was fooled over and over,—*we* were fooled, the dog and I,—until snow fell and the whole trick was written out in signs that our stumbling wits had to understand.

Around the rim of the steep wooded hillsides circling Lupton's Pond runs a rail fence, along which grow a number of old chestnut-oak trees with clusters of great stems from single spreading stumps that are particularly gone to holes.

Ordinarily, if one wanted a possum, about all he had to do was to climb the hill, prod around in the holes until he felt something soft that hissed, then reach in and pull the possum out.

This fall they had all been pulled out. One day five came forth from a single stump, which seemed to exhaust the hillside's crop for that year, so that I quite ceased looking into the stumps for more.

Several times the dog had started a trail in the woods at the head of the pond, gone up the hill to the crest, and halted, beating about, fooled. What was it? At first I took it to be a coon; for there is no other creature in our woods so thoughtful of his steps. One whose range is infested with dogs develops astonishing care and cunning.

An old coon in such a country will never go straight home, nor take a beaten path. Out on the boundaries of his range he trots along without minding how he steps. The dogs may have fun with his trail here. He intends only that they shall not follow him clear home, that they shall not find his home-tree, nor even the vicinity of it.

So, as he enters his own neighborhood swamp

his movements change. The dogs may be hard after him or not. If not close behind, he knows by long experience that they may be expected, and never so far forgets his precious skin as to leave a clue pointing toward home.

Instead he trots along a boundary fence, or up the swamp stream, leaping all the crossing logs, and coming out, likely, on the bank away from the nest-tree. Farther down he jumps the stream, runs hard toward a big gum, and from a dozen feet away takes a flying leap, catching the trunk up just out of reach of the keen-nosed dogs. On up he goes a little and leaps again, touching the ground ten feet out, thus leaving a gap, a blank, of twenty or more feet in his trail.

The stream or fence has puzzled the dogs ; but now they begin to worry. They circle and finally pick up the scent beyond the first gap, only to run instantly into a greater blank, one that the widest circling does not cross. For the coon has taken to another tree ; out on the limbs of this to still another, and on, like a squirrel, from tree to tree for perhaps a hundred yards, on, it may be, to his own high hollow.

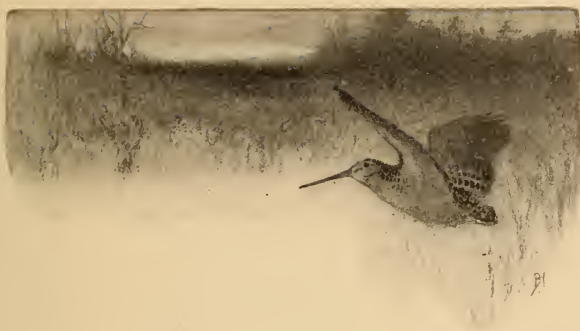
It was such a broken trail that I thought the dog must be running. She could get no farther than the top of the slope: Over the fence, under it, and out far and wide she would go, but never a sniff of the lost scent.

Then came a light snow, and on the white page of the hillside in his own hand was written the story of a large possum, who had been along the stream at the head of the pond, had gone up the hill to a fallen pine, out along this by way of the thick top to the fence-post, and down the rails.

The writing was plain in the sticky snow, and so was the mystery of the broken trail. I hurried along the fence and saw ahead that a sagging post leaned in against one of the large chestnut-oaks. Instinctively I knew that my possum was in that tree.

Sure enough, the snow was brushed from the post; there were signs on the trunk, and down between the twin boles was the hole, smooth, clean, and possumy. The crafty old fellow had squeezed hard to get in and had left a hair or two on the rim of his entrance.

“ONE FLEW, EAST AND ONE FLEW
WEST”



“ONE FLEW EAST AND ONE FLEW
WEST”

EARLY dusk of a cold March night was falling. The two red maples in the little alder swale beyond the pasture stood penciled on the gray sky. A robin had been singing ; but now the deep winter hush had crept back over the fields.

Suddenly there was a hiss and winnow of wings close above my head. I dodged. Past me, lined for the swale, with an erratic, rotary flight as if fired from a rifle, sped a bird.

“He’s back !” I exclaimed. “He escaped !” And through my cold, rain-soaked world of wood

and field and swale shot a new, wild thrill of life. It was the return of a woodcock that had nested for several seasons along a slender, alder-hidden stream about half a mile from my home.

I was not expecting him back this spring. When the gunning season opened the previous July, at least a score of men knew that a single pair of woodcocks had nested in the swale; and up and down, over and over, one after another they beat it, beat it by clump, by tussock, by square foot for the birds, killing five. Four of these were the young of that summer; the fifth was one of the parents.

The swale turned brown, and soon lay silent and bleak. I could not pass it during the winter without a feeling akin to anger. It was a narrow strip, barely fifty feet across at its widest, flanked by a wooded hillside and by wide, tilled fields. But it was all the swamp, all the meadow I had; and that this should be robbed of its life, that all my out-of-doors within vision range should never again hold a woodcock's nest, was more than a grief.

I had been robbed. Twenty men against six woodcocks! And they had been eager to kill

the last pair breeding in this last shrinking covert.

They had been eager—but one of the pair, by some miracle, had escaped. There he went humming through the dusk, and all my world was changed.

He would induce some young, unmated female on her way north to remain with him, and there would yet be a home in the swale. At first I feared lest this one should prove to be a female that would be lured away; if not, then that he might be a migrant himself, who would halt only to feed that night. But the next day I found him along the stream, and I knew by the way he got to cover that he was on familiar ground and had come to stay.

What a queer, comical-looking bird he is! If nature ever had any feeble-minded offspring, you would surely put Woodcock down for one. But he has a full share of bird sense. The matter with him is partly his nocturnal habits. Night does not seem the birds' natural wake-time, and those that turn it into day invariably take on some odd, almost abnormal appearance—the owl assumes his ridiculous show of wis-

dom, and the woodcock wears a vacuous expression that is positively imbecile.

Yet it is neither imbecility nor wisdom, but merely beaks and eyes. With eyes to the front and a beak made for spectacles, the owl looks very professorial. The woodcock's eyes are at the rear and in the top of his head. If he wore glasses, they would rest on the back of his neck.

This position for the bird's eyes, however, is a convenient one. He literally needs to see out of the top of his head a part of the time. His only food is angleworms, for the catching of which nature provides him a three-inch probe of a bill. Then, for his safety and comfort when sounding for the worms, in order to keep his eyes out of the mire, she puts them up on the top of his head, just as a clam-digger rolls up his sleeves when at his task in the mud.

Nature is preëminently practical, even at the cost of appearance, as the eyes of the woodcock attest. And she has done another practical thing for this freak child which adds to his oddity and interest—this time in connection with his beak.

In the bare, damp spots among the alders and along the edge of the corn-field, soon after Woodcock arrived, I found his borings—groups of a dozen or more holes where, in hunting worms, he had plunged his bill into the earth up to his eyes (up to the place where his eyes would normally have been). I had always wondered how the bird, when he felt a worm, could open his bill with it forced to the hilt in stiff, solid earth, for surely he does not thrust it down already open. Year after year I kept on wondering instead of investigating, until one day a man showed me that there was a curious flexible tip to the upper mandible which the bird could move independently of the rest of the beak, and thus grasp the luckless worm, though deep in the mud.

This is distinction enough for one beak, and we ought not to expect of it a song. Nor do we. One cannot think of a hooked beak or a flat beak or a long beak emitting music. It is not for his singing that I should miss Woodcock in the swale, but for his dancing. No festival fires among the tepees, no barbecue among the cabins, ever saw wilder, more frenzied dancing

than the alders witness night after night in early spring.

And if the woodcock does not sing, he harps his own accompaniment—a weird wing music, half æolian, that sets you dancing, too, as no other bird music you ever heard.

It is dusk in the swale. I am sitting on the root of one of the red maples, now in misty garnet bloom. A wavering line of piping hylas marks the course of the stream. Scattered bird-calls come from the covert, and out of the deepening blue overhead falls a flock of notes, the *chinks* of migrants winging north.

Presently, in the grassy level across the stream, sounds a clear *peent! peent! peent!* I listen, half rising. *Peent! peent! peent!* slow and regular; then, bursting from cover with the rush of a rocket, spins the woodcock. Out against the gray horizon he sweeps, and round on the first turn of his soaring spiral. The hum of his wings fills the swale. Round and round, swifter and swifter, the hum rising shrill as he mounts two hundred—three hundred—four hundred feet into the dusky sky, and hangs—hangs a whirling blur on the blue, and drops—headlong, with a

pitching, zigzag flight and the velocity of a bullet, whistling, as he falls, a low, pearly trill of love that smothers in the whirl of his alighting wings.

It is all over, and I am standing, my held breath coming in gasps. Then there sounds again that measured, preparatory *peent ! peent !* and I await the second burst, the looping spiral flight, the drop, and the clear, low whistle of love. And so the dance goes on as the darkness thickens, until only a winnow whirls shrill toward the stars, and a sweet, pearly whistle ripples down through the gloom.

While waiting there in the twilight I saw the last year's nest of a wood-thrush in the leafless top of a slender sapling. I had not heard Wood-thrush yet this spring. What if he should not return to the strip of alder-bottom? Happily there is no immediate danger. Yet I should miss the wild love-dance of my woodcock almost as much as I should the serene love-song of the thrush. I should miss the personality of my woodcock even more. He is so elusive, so unexpected, so suggestive of bog and stream. There is a thrill in his break from cover like the thrill

one feels in the strike and whirl of a trout. Fifty thrushes would fifty times sweeten the swale ; my single pair of woodcocks would keep it all wild and untamed.

But they are gone. Like all birds, the woodcocks have many natural enemies ; they are one of their own worst enemies in building so early that snows and frosts destroy the eggs, and in places where April freshets sweep them away. Yet in spite of all this, they would flourish were it not for the pot-hunter. They could be hunted during the weeks of the fall migration, as the New England States allow, and still flourish. But in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and several other States they are shot in July, almost before the young are on the wing. And in the Southern States, excepting South Carolina and Alabama, no protection is afforded them whatever. Here from the North they congregate during the winter, and here all winter long they are slaughtered and shipped back to the North — to the States that are trying to save them.

From everywhere over their wide range, between the Atlantic coast and the line of the

Mississippi River, the woodcocks are disappearing. Once gone, they can hardly be restored, largely because of their peculiar food, which makes them migratory, and which cannot be supplied them as grain can be supplied to the quail and to other game-birds. The dangers of their migrations and those which beset their nesting-places, the fewness of their eggs, their limited and easily hunted coverts, are causes which are making rapidly toward the extinction of the woodcocks, and which would greatly add to the difficulty of their restoration.

Already these noble birds have gone from the swale. There has been no love-dance over the alders since those of my woodcock many springs ago. The trees have been swept from the hill-side, the little stream has shrunk, and rush and sedge are now cropped close by the cattle. But the birds were not driven away.

They were shot.

The night that my woodcock whizzed past on his spring return to the swale, another bird sailed low over the yard on his way back from the swale. But his passing had lately become a nightly occurrence. It was little Aix, a tame

wood-duck, belonging to the boys of my nearest neighbor.

Little Aix, too, has a story, which is more than his own in particular, for it is the story of all the wood-ducks, just as the story of the woodcock in the swale is that of the woodcocks everywhere.

The wood-ducks are vanishing. Where a score of years ago they were plentiful, to-day they are almost unknown. And this is largely because of the utter lack of protection in many of the States, but more largely because only seven of the States and three of the Canadian provinces close the gunning season early enough in the winter to prevent spring shooting on the breeding-grounds. It is a sad comment that we have neither humaneness nor sportsmanlike spirit enough to let the birds alone during the mating- and nesting-time.

Among all our native game-birds there is no other so beautiful as the wood-duck, and his sad history is partly the history of his beauty. In rhyme and story, since story-telling began, we have seen how perilous a gift beauty is, and now we see it even in the woods. It is proving fatal

to the wood-duck. He is so graceful, so beautiful in dress, that when any other duck would be passed by, he is shot, in season and out, just to be looked at, taken home, and stuffed.

His gracious, confiding nature and his peculiar breeding-haunts have also to do with his threatened extinction. Unlike the others of his family (except in rare instances the goldeneye), the wood-duck builds in hollow trees along woodland streams and small grassy ponds. He does not seek the marshes, the open shore, or the wild, far-northern lakes. There is something in the society of man that attracts him. Except in the wide, treeless plains and in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, he is found scattered everywhere between Mexico and Hudson Bay ; and over all this wide range he breeds, being in many localities the only duck to remain through the summer, and hence his common name of "summer duck." He is naturally of a retiring disposition, but not suspicious or shy. Being thus a woods bird and easily approached, he falls a frequent and an easy victim.

He is an interesting and peculiar duck. He eats acorns ; he is even called the "acorn-duck."

If beechnuts or chestnuts are at hand, they will do as well as acorns. He is fond of chicken-grapes, insects, and seeds, too.

But what is even more unusual is the wood-duck's nesting-place. A duck's nest? Down in the soft, damp moss, on a bit of an island, or hidden in the high grass along some wild lake-side. Not so. The wood-duck builds in a hollow tree, high and dry, and even a long way from water, it may be.

The wood-duck's young, of course, are like all ducklings, with feet and bills bigger than their wings. They cannot possibly remain in the tree-hollow until old enough to fly. How do they get down to the water? Usually they scramble down head over heels; sometimes, it is said, the mother carries them, and if so, then her solution of this problem is one of the tenderest passages in all the bird life of the woods. But I have never seen it. I had hoped to see it the spring that little Aix, the tame wood-duck of my neighbor, was an egg,—hoped to see the mother carry each fat, downy duckling to the ground, dangling from her beak by its little flipper, then, with her brood all safely landed, lead them

together to the water and launch them,—but something happened.

And this happening concerns little Aix in particular, and this is now his story only.

I had known little Aix since egghood. I knew his parents before him. Where Silver Run grows darkly silent and glides into the open pond, there still leans the great maple stub from the hollow top of which little Aix and eleven others, in their buff-white shells, were taken and carried away to my neighbor's farm to be hatched.

A sweeter, wilder home never was than this along the run. A world of lake and swampy wood lies all around. Moss-grown oaks and maples shadow the cedar-scented stream which slips directly beneath the broken stub and widens—first among a hundred tiny islands, then into the quiet, unbroken surface of the pond.

More than once I have pushed softly into the run, led by one of the wood-ducks. Stemming ahead of the skiff, with a grace that would make me forget the charm of his exquisite dress, he would quietly lead me to the bend beyond the

stub and go ashore, lost instantly in the thick swamp tangle.

Or I would slip up and catch him half asleep, when he should have been very wide awake, for the one in the stub could not see out, and he was on guard. *Oe-eek! Oe-eek!* he would whistle low in alarm. Then, recognizing me, he would calmly watch while I edged past. Or I would come up and find no one about. I would tap. There in the splintered top she would stand, interested, but not disturbed, and with a look of trust in her eyes that I never could betray.

Little Aix was the only one of the brood to survive his motherless ducklinghood. But he throve in the barn-yard, and came through the winter to perfect and beautiful maturity. Up to this time he had been content in the barn-yard babel, but now a change came over him. Ever since the first February wedge of wild geese had passed honking through the skies, he had been restless, and had fallen more and more into the habit of flying over to the swale, where he stayed until dusk.

He was dressed for a wedding, but his bride

was not among the big, overgrown ducks of the yard. He sought her in the swale. Day after day he sought her, but she was not there. He waited for her coming. Others came. Line after line beat northward, high overhead, and he called; but they fanned on—they were scooters or mallards or goosanders.

Little Aix had not been taken in the autumn on the long south journey by his mother, where he might have found a bride. But then, his mother did not make the journey that fall. The day that her eggs were stolen she was shot from the top of the stub, and her world—and mine—of lake and wood was robbed.

I still can see her, if I wish, and her mate beside her, wired to a board in a glass case. But I had rather push quietly into the run and remember them as they were alive here.

The spot is still wild and sweet, but the charm of its life is gone. I hoped little Aix would find a bride and bring her back to the old home tree. He was my last hope. There was no other wood-duck around that I knew. Indeed, his parents in the stub were the only pair I had ever known in their own home. He, now, alone

of his beautiful kind, was left to me ; and he had no mate.

Day after day he waited for her in the swale ; night after night he returned. Then came a night when he did not return. Morning came and another night.

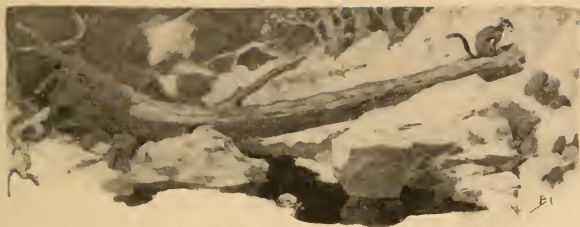
Anxiously I pulled up the lake and drew softly into the run. There stood the old stub. Had little Aix found his bride and brought her home ?

I caught a bit of bush by the bank and waited. Then, drawing near, I tapped gently. No, he had not come yet.

And that, too, was many springs ago.

The old maple stub still leans out over the run ; and still, whenever I can, I push quietly in among the shadows and remember—for little Aix, if he found a mate, never brought her back to the old home tree.

CHICKAREE



CHICKAREE

“OUT, you rascal! You arrant thief!” I heard some one shout in a high-pitched, feminine voice, and hurrying through the lilac hedge, I saw my hostess hurl an ear of corn into a pine-tree that overhung the smoke-house. Her face was burning with amazement and wrath.

“Think of it!” she cried. “I have fed and petted those red squirrels, I don’t know how long, and there goes one of them with a young phœbe-bird in his mouth. Years and years I’ve tried to lure the birds back to build in the yard as they used to. I had banished every cat, killed every snake, and bribed every boy in the neighborhood. They would not come for all

that. I could n't understand. But look at that !
The Judas !”

Thus, more and more is Chickaree's true character being discovered. My hostess had heard dark stories of Chickaree, but she had scouted them. “Why, he 's a *squirrel*, not a monster !” she had said. I had said that, too ; and I was unbelieving until I caught him deliberately killing a brood of young robins.

It is because he appears to be a squirrel that we are so unwilling to think him evil. What form in all the world, besides the dove's, is more suggestive of sweet innocence than the squirrel's ? Yet here is this red-coated, red-handed little wretch, having the form of godliness, but all scarlet within. The revelation of his true inwardness is a real pain, a loss of so much faith in the faithful out-of-doors. This squirrel has been masking among us in sheep's clothing. The wolf ! Out with him ! Who knows what murder he has not done ? what he is capable of, doing ?

Where do you get your unholy and horrible craving, Chickaree ? Is there weasel blood mingled with the squirrel in your veins ? You

are depraved past belief—seven times worse than the weasel, for his blood-thirst is natural. The black-snake and turkey-buzzard are almost moral compared with you. You are everything wicked ; you have earned your evil reputation ; you deserve to be shot.

Perhaps you do, though I am not just sure ; for it is very hard to say exactly what justice is. We, your judges, what virtue have we more than you, Chickaree ? Is our blood-thirst natural ? are we kin to the weasel ? We eat birds, young birds sometimes ; we even eat you.

No, Chickaree, you are no worse than the rest of us. You are bad enough, so bad that you and your tribe will have to be exterminated, I fear, because we righteous judges must needs doom somebody for all this mischief that we and our cats commit. I am sorry for you. I wish you would repent and eat only nuts and pine-buds, as befits an orthodox squirrel.

I am convinced that while we may not over-estimate the havoc of the red squirrels among the birds, we greatly underestimate that of the cats. Reduce the number of cats ; stop shooting

the birds, and help them with their nesting, and the red squirrels, hawks, and weasels will only serve, as it seems they must have been intended to serve, to maintain a proper balance in the wild life out-of-doors.

For, after all, we do not want to lose any creature from the few still left in our fields and woods. The passing of the red squirrel would be just as real a loss, and, in a way, as great a loss, as the extinction of the redbird. I care to hear him bluster in the pines. It is as foolish to ask which of the two I had rather lose, red squirrel from the woods, or redbird from the swale, as to ask which of my two children I had rather give up, the three-year-old who can whistle, or the one-year-old who can only jabber.

Chickaree has a wider acquaintance among us humans than any other wild fellow in fur; and more friends, too, despite the multiplying of those who know his real nature. He has friends because he has earned them. Who ever saw a chickaree, if he were given the slightest chance to be friendly, that was bashful, squeamish, or unsociable?

He spills over with loud talk and conceit, but

he never fails to be interesting. It is partly because he is so frankly interested in one's affairs that he is so entertaining. A gossiping gadabout, a busybody, a scold; manners of an English sparrow (which alone is enough to have him hanged), he—but what shall I say more? This: that, in spite of his faults, I like him and don't want him hanged.

I often go into the woods when I deserve and enjoy a scolding. Many a day, many an acre hereabout, would utterly lack the sound and form of any wild thing were it not for Chickaree. He is mostly sound, I know; yet he has agile legs, too, and quick wit and audacity. He has a constitution and an ability to take care of himself that I like to think of. See how he thrives. You cannot find a deep wood, a shaded roadside, a park, or a graveyard to which Chickaree does not dispute the title.

I once met one who claimed to own, if I understood him, the whole north slope of Mount Washington. This was really more than he needed, but he was a very greedy squirrel, and I smile now as I remember how his greed overreached itself and how it brought him low.

The mountain did not fall upon him, only half a loaf of bread. But half a loaf of bread, if it falls just right, may hurt, as every one knows who has dropped even a slice of bread on his toes—butter side down.

Descending the mountain by way of the carriage-road, we stopped at a little stone bridge to eat our lunch, when this squirrel came forth and ordered us on. He immediately smelled the lunch, however, and grew silent, creeping up within arm's-reach of us, watching how we ate. He showed no sign of timidity, only curiosity, then wonder, then deep, delighted sniffings. The smells of molasses cookies and Summit House rolls were new savors, new and gnawing. They made him hungry, so madly hungry that, when I turned and threw the lunch-box into the dry bed of the stream, he was into it almost as soon as it landed.

His first bite was of bread and butter. Without pausing to chew it, he seized the slice, scurried off down a log, and disappeared in the forest. "Where is he taking it?" we asked. Not far away, for suddenly he popped over a rock, gave us a quick glance, and jumped into the box again.

There were several cookies left in the box, some slices of bread, and nearly half a loaf of bread uncut.

Down the log ran Chickaree with a second slice, I watching from where I sat, following him by the gleam of the white bread, which showed clearly in the tangle and dark of the forest. It flashed, then vanished, then flashed again into view—flash, flash, flash—round and round and round up a tall spruce, till I lost it in the top. We were trying to catch sight of him returning, when he startled us by again landing, with a sudden leap, right in the middle of the box.

This time he found the uncut loaf; and he also found the measure of his wit and muscle. Now he grew greedy. He should have been content with the slices. Covetousness, also, goeth before a fall.

There are some of us humans who will take the half-loaf when we cannot get the whole; but it were better for most of us if even the half-loaf were sliced. How much better it would have been for Chickaree!

Here was a windfall, such a windfall as comes

but once to a mountain squirrel, and Chickaree was excited. How was he to hide this big piece? Yes, *hide* it; for it was plain to us that he meant no other squirrel to share his luck, or even know about it, else why his silence, excitement, and hurry?

Tilting the loaf up, he fixed his long teeth into the top crust, and by dint of backing and pulling got out of the gully, landing the loaf in time upon the top of a flat rock. Unable to raise his load clear, he came round behind it in order to push. It was slow, hard work. Becoming more and more anxious, he forgot that the rock, in the direction he was going, ended abruptly with a sheer fall of ten feet.

On he struggled across the rough, lichened surface, inch by inch, until, catching a good foothold, he gave a mighty shove and went over, he and his loaf together, striking with a beautiful splash in a little pool of water below.

We took a bit of wicked pleasure in his fall, as we saw him scramble out unhurt. He came out, however, still holding to his loaf. But it was thoroughly soaked now,—a condition that was evidently new to Chickaree,—and as he

dragged it up the crust came off, letting the loaf tumble back into the water. He ran away to hide the crust, then came back quickly to the pool.

It was fun to see him fish for that queer piece of bread. He would catch it in his paws, take it in his mouth, scoop and pull and root, but each time get only crumbs. The provoking stuff had suddenly gone soft—or bewitched. It would not come out.

But Chickaree was not bewitched. He was angry—plain old-Adam anger. Up on the log he jumped, flipped his tail, clawed the bark, and, with a burst of passion, gave the whole mountain a furious upbraiding. It was the mountain, for he looked at nothing in particular, nothing smaller. He railed. After one terrible minute he came back to us, coughing and husky and sore in the throat.

When he reached the box, how quickly his spirit changed! No April sky ever broke more suddenly into rainy sunshine than Chickaree on picking up one of the molasses cookies. He was surprised and delighted. Never had he tasted its like. Birch catkins and beechnuts? Flat!

Simply flat in comparison. Even the tender terminal buds of the pine would be tasteless now. And stale acorns? Dreadful!

All this we saw in his countenance as he took the first mouthful and bolted with the cooky. He bolted, but stopped short for another bite. Then on he went, only to halt for a third bite; started again, but came to a dead stop on the end of the log, and finished the cooky then and there.

I now went after him to see if I could find where he had hidden the bread. As I stepped upon the log, he turned and came down it toward me. I have always wished since that I had not flinched.

He drew near; walked over my foot and smelled of me. Cookies! Where? He sniffed and sniffed; then catching the odor of the hand hanging at my side, he stood up to get a bite, when the foolish hand twitched. That was enough. It had moved. He would not approach me again.

The two slices I found, but not the crust. One of them was high up in the top of a spruce, the other in the moss behind a stump.

Perhaps these were temporary hiding-places,

chosen hurriedly in his excitement, from which, later on, he would collect his spoil for storage in some secret hollow. I am not certain, however, that Chickaree has a barn, a winter storehouse. I have often found collections of pignuts in old tree-hollows that looked as if Chickaree had stored them there. Still they were always *shells* only. The whole nuts may have been carried into the hollows for safety and convenience, a few at a time, as they were to be eaten.

Yet, more than once I have caught Chickaree stuffing hollow rails with corn. Perhaps he intended to keep this store against the winter. I suspect, for I know Chickaree, that it was more mischief and itching for occupation, than provision against need.

He never finished the stuffing. Long before the cavity was full the little scatterbrain would be off at some other active but useless task, leaving his store to be found and devoured by the jays or the mice. Chickaree will never remember that the second rail from the bottom, in the section between the stump and the sassafras-tree, holds a pint of golden corn.

All wild animals are mere children. They all

love to put things into holes. They all must be busy—if with nothing else than their tails. But they rarely *work*.

I knew a chickaree who lived in a little glen by the side of Thorn Mountain Cabin, whose activity took on the character of real work. But why in August, two months before the end of the harvest, he should pick green catkins from the birch, I don't know. You cannot store them when they are dead ripe, perhaps, for they may fall to pieces. As I watched him, however, I concluded he was doing the work, not seriously, but for fun. He must do something; and this tree, full of little cones, appealed to him as a box of buttons to a baby.

He owned this great single birch at the head of the glen. He lived in it alone, and warred against all trespassers, birds or beasts.

I have seen him chase a junco up and down and across the top until the bird flew off. A flock of them settling among the branches drove him frantic. I, too, called down his wrath; but after a week of daily visits he allowed me to stretch out upon the moss beneath the low wide limbs and watch him work.

His morning task was to hide about a pint of catkins from this yellow birch in a secret crib among the ferns of the glen. Morning after morning I found him busy, sometimes arriving early enough to see him begin ; and I am quite sure he often did his stint before he took breakfast.

Up and down the tree he would race, a round trip every three minutes, loaded with a single catkin each time down. After storing about thirty he would stop with one upon a certain bottom limb, and here, on the under side of the leaning bole, safely hidden from overhead enemies, he would begin breakfast, scattering the winged seeds, as he ate the catkin, down in a thin flaky shower upon me underneath. He always ate squatting close upon this same limb and backed up against the trunk. The ground below was snowed under with the scales which had fallen as he husked the seeds.

Here, too, he slept, I think, during the summer nights. He may have had a hole among the rocks, but I am sure he had no nest in the glen. Having lived only part of the year with these mountain squirrels, I am not so well acquainted

with their nesting habits as I am with those of the squirrels in the piny woods of New Jersey. The red squirrels are very abundant among the pines, and here they live in nests the year around.

These beds are very bulky, built mostly of cedar bark, stripped fine and matted into an irregular mass the size of a hat. The doorways open from the bottoms or sides, leaving the roofs without a crack and perfectly waterproof.

Sometimes an abandoned crow's nest is taken for the foundation. In this a deep, soft bed of newly shredded bark is made, and a thatch of the same material laid on above. Such a nest will not rock and sway when the winds are high, as the gray squirrel's often will; for the crows did not build out in the hands of the branches, but close up on the shoulders. What it lacks of that kind of thrill, however, will be more than made good by the comfort and security obtained from the thick nest-bottom of the crows.

About my home in New England Chickaree is almost a ground-squirrel, rarely traveling a road higher than a stone wall. But in the Southern pines he runs the tree-tops, scampering along the dizzy roads almost as fast as

one can run on the ground beneath. It makes one pause to see him skip along a slender limb, jump to a second, race out to its tip, and leap—clearing fifteen feet—to catch the very ends of another limb swaying in the air fifty feet above one.

During the early summer the tender terminal buds of the pine (barring young birds) furnish Chickaree the bulk of his food. Acorns, chestnuts, corn, and the pine-cone seeds he eats later on in the fall and winter.

He seems particularly abundant and particularly at home among the pines. He and Sceloporus, the pine-tree lizard, are joint possessors of the sandy barrens. And Chickaree fits his surroundings. The gray squirrel's color blends naturally with the neutral, lichen-mottled boles of the oak and maple woods. He is rarely found in the pines; but that is partly because he is afraid of Chickaree and hates him as he hates poison. Chickaree's color is piny, shading perfectly with the dusky red-browns of the barrens. These are his rightful realm. Fortunately he does less harm here than almost anywhere else, for the small birds that nest in the

piners are comparatively few. Here he may live, for we have no cause to carry our war with him into the barrens.

There is a large clump of pines beyond Cubby Hollow where I am always sure of a chickaree-scolding. The moment I get within range one of the little wretches will climb a tree and warn me to keep out. He is instantly joined by several others, and together they follow me overhead, disputing every step with me, swaggering, growling, and pouring forth a torrent of threat and abuse until wheezy and winded.

It is bluster, most of it ; they love to make a noise. If I drop down at the foot of a low-limbed pine, they gather round, anxious for a look at me, close to. Once I remember that a chipmunk joined them, and his daring lent them courage. Then came an inquisitive little chickadee, behind whom one of the squirrels, now only a bundle of curiosity, crept down within reach of me, flattened himself to the trunk, and began a running comment, a speculation as to my character, in little broken snorts, sniffs, coughs, and snickers, emphasizing it all with jerky gesticulations of his tail.

What did he say about me? Slighting things, I have no doubt ; deriding me, perhaps, because I could not climb trees and bite off pine-buds. I don't know. But I do know this, that, whatever he said, I enjoyed having him near me, for I am sure that he half enjoyed my being near him. And I like the pines better for his sake. They would often be dull and silent if he were gone, for the pines are not companionable trees. He is their spirit of lightness, gaiety, and chatter.

BIRD FRIENDSHIPS



BIRD FRIENDSHIPS

IT is not the sight of mere numbers that interests us as the “gathering swallows twitter in the skies,” but rather the gathering itself, and the twittering—the feeling of kinship and common interest which we see in the flocking. These birds are apparently social creatures ; and social feelings are human. By so much are we and the swallows one.

It shows a very pleasing quality in bird nature, this need which leads them to flock ; and it seems sometimes to be a deeper, more human feeling than mere bird-of-a-feather interest—something close akin to friendship.

The autumn flocking of the swallows and the

blackbirds, while far from meaning friendship, means a great deal more indeed than polite sociability, a drawing-room gathering.

There seem to be such functions in birddom. A very select and unspotted company of crows in my neighborhood meet frequently throughout late summer and in the autumn, for no other reason, apparently, than the pleasure of one another's society. They are as decorous as they are select, usually, though not always.

One day I will see them sitting about in the top of a great solitary white oak beyond the meadow and talking quietly. Gossip running short, they adjourn to the meadow below for an equally quiet feed along the little river. Another day I will hear them boisterously caw-cawing in a very gale of good time. There is fur awing. Somebody is "it." Suddenly into the air they scatter, and up, in the tumbling, whirling confusion of some game, all cawing at the top of their lungs. I am not versed in crow sports, but this looks and sounds very much like the rough-and-tumble of a college foot-ball contest. On yet another day the loud cawing will be furious and angry. Anybody can tell

when a crow is angry. If I wait now, I am pretty certain to see the whole elect company drumming a red-tailed hawk or a blundering barred owl out of the neighborhood.

They are an exclusive lot, these corbies, and highly sociable. As far as I can make out, however, they flock for the mere pleasure of it—for the noise, the push, and the gossip of a crowd. They are neighborly, but hardly show real friendship.

It is somewhat different with the swallows and with many of the migrants. The same friendly class feelings draw the swallows together as draw the crows. A swallow is a swallow. But migrating swallows are often not all of one feather. I have seen barn, bank, and tree swallows together, and with them, in one moving flock, king-birds, martins, swifts, and chip-pies. All of these, in a general way, were of the same mind, liking and disliking the same things. But, what was far more, at these migration-times they were all of the same purpose: all going a journey, a journey full of hardships and pleasures, common alike to every one upon the road.

In traveling this long unguarded highway

mere feather distinctions are likely to disappear. Mutual need and good-fellowship prevail. It is enough to be a bird, any kind of a well-disposed bird, going this southern journey. For how does one migrating bird differ from another? He does not sing now, nor wear his fine feathers, nor do a hundred things that in the summer made him sufficient unto himself. He just travels, and takes what comes; and the more to share it all, the merrier. A common purpose started the birds off, and now a common interest draws all of them together. They are not a flock, but a company; not swallows and swifts merely: they are bird pilgrims, of many feathers, passing along the strange migration road to a distant land.

Perhaps this camaraderie of the pilgrimage never reaches down to real friendship. But what about that fellow-feeling which is brought out by the stress of winter? This at least must come very near to friendship. A lean, hungry winter makes close comrades among the birds. They will all flock then. The only solitary, defiant bird I meet in the winter is the great northern shrike. What a froward, stiff-necked

sinner he is! But how superb! No cheeping, no cowering, no huddling together for him. How I hate and admire him!

But birds that have hearts in their breasts, though they were as foreigners to one another in the summer, nesting in regions far apart, will flock during the long deep snows and hard weather. Every winter I see mixed bands of goldfinches, juncos, and tree-sparrows whirling over the snow, the goldfinches leading—all of them in search of grass and seedy weed-heads. Nuthatches, kinglets, and chickadees will *yank-yank*, *tee-tee*, and *phee-he-be* by the hour together, apparently to their great consolation and mutual support.

This misery-made companionship, though real and helpful at the time, is doubtless not quite self-forgetful enough to be called friendship. A goaded friendship must lack something of friendship's virtue.

Of a different quality entirely seems the feeling that holds the broods of certain birds together in a real, intimate family life. Family life among the birds? We usually think of the nestlings as being led out by the parent birds

and fed until they learn to forage for themselves, then scattering, each going its separate way. 'And so most nestlings do. But there are exceptions. In some bird families the young grow up together, leaving neither parents nor home neighborhood until they mate and build homes of their own. Every covey of quails is such a family; so, too, I think, is every flock of chickadees. Every wedge of wild geese is either a family or a small neighborhood of families on a journey.

One dare not let his fancy free with the thought of such family life. It is too dangerously beautiful. What intimacies, what brother-love and mother-love, what human home scenes, could one not imagine? Not wholly imagine, either. More than one tender passage I have actually seen and heard.

And so have hundreds of observers, doubtless. For who has not listened to a mother quail calling her hunted family together when the snow and the night were falling? It is most sweetly, tenderly human—the little mother, standing upon the fence or in the snow of the silent fields, calling softly through the storm until the

young ones answer and, one by one, come hurrying to her out of the dusk, and murmuring. Some of them do not hear. They have been frightened far away. Louder now she whistles : *Whir-rl-le, whir-r-rl-le, whir-r-r-rl-le !* But there is only the faint purr of the falling snow, only darkness and the silent ghostly fields.

Like little children, the covey will sometimes dream or be disturbed by some sound half heard in their sleep. I have been near when the mother soothed them. A covey lived down the bushy hillside, just beneath the house. Coming up from the meadow one September night, I passed close to their roost, and stopped in the moonlight just beyond. Off across the meadow the hounds were baying on the trail of a fox. They were coming fast toward me. As they broke into the open on the hills beyond the meadow, I heard a movement among the quails, then a low murmuring. The cry of the hounds was disturbing the brood ; they were uneasy and restless : and the mother was stilling their fears, murmuring something low and soft to reassure them.

They quieted at once ; and it was well. A

moment later, up the narrow path by the side of which they were sleeping trotted the fox. Upon seeing me he paused, and so close to them that their slightest stir would have been caught by his keen, quick ears.

So throughout the winter and far into the spring they live together, an intimate, happy family—more intimate and happier, perhaps, than many human families. For see what a number of children there are ! It is significant, is it not, that only large bird families apparently know the joy of family life ?

Even here among the quail there may be no real love and friendship, no affection, no sharing among the children. But there must be true mother-love in the breast of such a mother bird as this. Then why not love in the children ?

Interpret it as we please, with or without sentiment, we cannot deny the existence of this family life among the birds.

The need of guidance, of food and protection, may explain it in the case of the migrating geese ; but this is not enough for the quail and the chickadee families.

FARM-YARD STUDIES



FARM-YARD STUDIES

I

WE were tied up for the night. Dusk and the swamp silence had settled—settled with a distinctness and presence almost supernatural. A banjo had been twanging, but the breakdown was done, the shuffling feet quiet. The little cotton-boat had become a part of the moonlit silence and the river swamp.

Two or three roustabouts were sitting atop the rosin-barrels near by, under the spell, appa-

rently, of the round autumnal moon. There was frost in the air and a thousand fragrant odors from the ripened swamp ; but not a cry nor call in the stillness, until, suddenly, breaking through the hush with a jarring, eery echo, sounded the hoot of a great horned owl.

One of the roustabouts dropped to the deck, holding up his hand. We listened. Again the weird, startling *Whoo, hoo-hoo-hoo-who-you-ah-ah!*

“Dat de king owl,” whispered the darky. “He’s out for turkey. Ol’ gobbler done gone hid. Listen ! de king owl gwine make him talk.”

We listened, waiting ; but there came no answering talk, no gobble of challenge out of the swamp. I sat up until the moon rode high overhead, hoping “de king owl” would drive one of the wild swamp turkeys from its tree-top roost and send him fluttering and talking over the open river. I was to have a sight of one the next day,—a dead one,—but I am still waiting to see and hear the great bronze bird alive in its native haunts.

They were all about me here on the Savannah

—a few of them. The next day at one of the landings a colored boy brought a fine gobbler aboard which he had shot back in the swamp. In the tops of the tall cottonwoods all through the wilder stretches of the South and the great Southwest, scattering flocks of the native wild turkeys still roost. They are so few and wild, however, that the naturalist who would study the habits of the bird is almost compelled, nowadays, to go to the barn-yard, tame and unromantic as that locality is.

If one does not mind the setting, he will find the barn-yard a more convenient place of study and quite as good as the primeval forests; for the turkey is a maddeningly perverse, persistent creature, that centuries of civilizing still leave as unchanged in habit as in looks. When wild turkeys in the market hang side by side with tame ones, only a keen-eyed naturalist can tell from their appearance which birds had never seen a barn-yard, and which had descended by a traceable barn-yard line from the year 1526. No less persistent have been the old wild habits of the birds.

Like our house-cats, the turkeys wear a cloak

of domesticity; but not even pussy could put hers off and go utterly wild more readily than the turkey. Not an original woods trait or habit seems to have been radically changed—hardly altered—by all our fine efforts on the birds at home and abroad. For the turkey has traveled. He is strictly an American,—Mexican, perhaps,—sailing first from Mexican shores about 1526, and not returning until the Pilgrims and early settlers came. He was brought back a larger bird than when he first set out, but still a turkey and unalterably American.

Which does not mean that he is a good American, deserving the eagle's national place. The turkey is unalterable because he cannot learn anything, so nearly brainless is he. The father—it was the mother—of all the turkeys was originally endowed with two wits and as many crafty ways as she had toes. Since her day no turkey-hen has gained a third wit, nor learned a new way, nor forgotten one of the old ones. No turkey-*gobbler* ever had or shall have any wit at all.

From Spain, whence the turkey spread over Europe, we can trace his wanderings back to the

West Indies, and farther back to Mexico, where the parent stock still survives. It is from this Southwestern variety, *Meleagris mexicana*, and not from the variety in the East and North, that our domestic turkey has sprung. The only marked difference in the two varieties is that *mexicana* has creamy-white tips to his tail-feathers and to those over-lapping the base of the tail, while *gallopavo's* tips are chestnut-brown. The Southwestern bird, too, is somewhat greener than the Northern.

Both varieties are growing very rare, and before long will become extinct. Our Northern bird was abundant in some parts as late as Audubon's day. He bought them for "three-pence each." Yet he says, speaking of the Alleghanies: "While in the Great Pine Forest in 1829, I found a single feather that had been dropped from the tail of a female, but saw no bird of the kind." One can range half of the country now and not find so much as a feather.

If they were wholly gone, if they had never been studied wild by the naturalists, we still could almost write the life-history of the bird from the habits of our tame turkeys.

The tame turkey-hen is notorious for stealing her nest. The wild hen steals hers—not to exasperate her owner, of course, as is the common belief about the domestic turkey, but to get away from the gobbler, who, in order to prolong the honeymoon, will break the eggs as fast as they are laid. He would lay him down and die, almost, for female adoration. He has just enough brains to be sentimental, jealous, and boundlessly fond of himself. His wives, too, are fools enough to worship him, until—there comes an egg. That event makes them wise. They understand this strutting coxcomb, and quietly turning their backs on him, leave him to parade to his precious self alone.

There are crows, also, and buzzards from whom the hen must hide the eggs. Nor dare she forget her own danger while sitting, for there are foxes, owls, and prowling lynxes ready enough to pounce upon her. On the farm most of these enemies have taken human form.

For a nest the wild hen, like her sister in the pasture-woods, scratches a slight depression in the ground, usually under a thick bush, sometimes in a hollow log, and lays from twelve to

twenty eggs, which are somewhat smaller and more elongated than the tame turkey's, but of the same color : dull cream, sprinkled with reddish dots.

More than one hunt for the stolen turkey nest has been futile because the cautious mother covered the eggs carefully when leaving them. This is one of the wild habits that have persisted. The wild hen, as the hatching approaches, will not trust even this precaution, but remains without food and drink upon the nest until the chicks can be led off. She can scarcely be driven from it, often allowing herself to be captured first.

Mother-love burns fierce in her. Such helpless things are her chicks ! She hears them peeping in the shell and breaks it to help them out. She preens and dries them and keeps them close under her for days.

Not for a week after hatching does she allow them out in a rain. After that, against the cold of a wetting, the wild mother, it is said, will feed the buds of the spice-bush to her brood, as our grandmothers used to administer mint tea.

The tame hen seems to have lost much of this

native mother skill, doubtless because for many generations she has been relieved of the larger part of the responsibility. I never knew one to doctor her infants for vermin. But the wild hen will. The woods are full of ticks and detestable vermin as deadly as cold rains. When her brood begins to lag and pine, the mother knows, and leading them to some old ant-hill, she gives them a sousing dust-bath. The vermin hate the odor of the ant-scented dust, and after a series of washings disappear.

This is wise ; but if report be true, then the wild turkey is as wise and far-seeing a mother as the woods contain. One observer tells of three hens that stole off together and fixed up a nest between themselves. Each put in her eggs—forty-two in all—and each took turns guarding, so that the nest was never left alone.

What special enemy caused this unique partnership the naturalist does not say. The three mothers built together, brooded together, and together guarded the nest. But how did those three mothers divide the babies?

Every one who has had the least to do with turkeys knows their timidity and indecision.

How often, as a boy, I have watched them going to roost in the apple-trees and counted the times they have stretched their necks and bobbed, preparatory to an upward move! I don't remember the best record for false moves, but so distinct is the impression of the hesitancy and timid bobbing that I never see a live turkey without saying mentally :

One for the money, two for the show,
Three to get ready, and four to—get ready again.

These traits lead the wild birds to very absurd actions in the course of their autumn wanderings.

Late in October the turkeys of each neighborhood get together in flocks of from ten to a hundred and travel on foot through the rich bottom-lands in search of food. In these journeys the males go ahead, apart from the females, and lead the way. The hens, each conducting her family in a more or less separate group, come straggling leisurely along in the rear. As they advance, they meet other flocks, thus swelling their numbers.

After a time they are sure to come to a river

—a dreadful thing, for, like the river of the song, it is one to cross. Up and down the banks stalk the gobblers, stretching their necks out over the water and making believe to start, as they do when going to roost in the apple-trees.

All day long, all the next day, all the third day, if the river is wide, they strut and cluck along the shore, getting up their courage. The ridiculous creatures have wings; they can fly; but they are afraid! By this time, however, the whole flock has mounted the tallest trees along the bank. One of the gobblers has come forward as leader in the emergency. Suddenly, from his perch, he utters a single cluck,—the signal for the start,—and every turkey sails into the air. There is a great flapping—and the terrible river is crossed.

A few weak members fall on the way over, but not to drown. Drawing the wings close in against their sides, and spreading their round fan-like tails to the breeze, they strike out as if born to swim, and come quickly to land.

The hens tag along at the beginning of the migration in order to keep their young out of the way of the old ill-natured gobblers who will

kill them. Toward the end of the wandering, in late November, the young are heavy enough to fight for themselves; and finally, at the finding of a particularly rich mast of nuts or winter grapes, the flocks mingle indiscriminately, and remain united until the spring.

II

AT the tail-end of the line of farm-yard inhabitants, far below the pig in interest and intelligence, stands the gobbler. Of all our birds there is in him the least to be commended. Roasting alone redeems him. Strangely enough, associated with him in the yard, served with him at the same Thanksgiving table, is the bird at the head of the line. I doubt if there is bird or beast, wild or tame, that for real interest and admirable nature approaches the gander.

Certainly no other bird voice comes to us with a clearer call, no other flight so quickens us, no other life among birds reads so like an epic as the wild gander's, this voyageur of the clouds, this ranger of the zones.

Farm-yard life for the goose is an entirely dif-

ferent thing from the wild, free life of his free wild relatives. In this he differs from the turkey—because he has more sense, and hence is more adaptable ; and because his farm-yard life reaches farther back into the far-away past. He has had more time to forget and to learn. Morally he has resisted the degenerating influences of his human associations most marvelously. He has not the wings of former days ; but this is not his fault. Even a goose, by taking thought, cannot turn pounds of his over-fed body into inches of wing.

The wild Canada geese, whose honking, as they pass, still stirs vague longings in their fat brothers of the farm-yard, and sets them honking in reply, will doubtless long outlast the dwindling flocks of wild turkeys. Along with the extreme dangers of migration, there seem to go superior gifts of brain and wing and body which more than compensate. The turkey wanders a little on foot, but he is a serf, quite fast to the soil. The goose is a migrant and hence is free.

In February the Canada geese are scattered along the margins of our Southern waters, al-

ready preparing for their flight northward to Canada, Labrador, and Alaska. Early spring finds them back in their breeding-haunts with nests well under way. Then, by September, the long return flight begins, the flocks passing over the Middle States for a month or more, but all reaching the warm shores of the South before our Northern waters are closed.

This journey in the spring is a honeymoon trip; in the fall, a family excursion. The wild geese (this cannot be said of tame ones) are ideally wedded. Nothing of the gobbler's polygamy, jealousy, and viciousness is shown by the gander; the goose does not steal away from him to make her nest. She and he are "engaged" before the spring migration begins. They sail away in company with like lovers to wed and go off together as soon as the flock reaches the Northern nesting-meadows.

Housekeeping for the geese is a particularly serious business. The gander assumes his full share of the trouble. He never shirks nor leaves his mate. Day and night he stands on duty, guarding the mother and the nest—with his life if need be—against all enemies. He even helps

hatch the eggs, which is the limit of faithfulness.

The nest is a collection of driftweed and sticks lined with down, and placed, usually, on the ground in a marsh or meadow. Occasionally it is upon a stump, or even up in some old fish-hawk's nest on the top of a tree.

As soon as the goslings hatch they take to the water, and life for goose and gander tangles fast with trouble.

I once watched a pair, that had bred in captivity, as they were led about by one small gosling—their only one left out of a brood of seven. I cannot imagine their pulling through alive had all seven lived. From sunrise to nightfall their anxious day was spent trying to keep up with Master Gosling. He went whither he would ; they in single file waddled along behind, cautioning, chiding, lamenting, so uncomfortably hurried as to have time only to snatch a blade of grass here, a billful of water there, as the irrepressible infant straddled up and down his backyard world.

It is well along in August before the young are able to fly. All this time the parents have

cared for them, and will continue to keep them together as a family until the next spring.

No phase of the life of these great birds is so pleasing as the thought of this family life—gander, goose, and goslings a united family even while mingling as part of some numerous flock. Every wedge of wild geese that flies trumpeting overhead in the autumn nights is either a family or a neighborhood of families led by some strong old gander.

The great event in the goose calendar is this autumn flight. The life of all the rest of the year seems incidental to this. Need for food and escape from the deadly cold were doubtless the first causes of the migration, but they are secondary now. The flight for its own sake seems to have become a fever in their bones. For weeks previous to the departure, restlessness and strange desires possess the birds. The flight—mile-high, for a thousand miles; ordered, thrilling; past changing belts of landscape to a new world!—such a flight is the fulfilment of life.

The love of it is far more than the desire for food. Next to the want of mate and offspring is the need for this flight. It is not a desire of

the flesh, but of the spirit. Food does not fail in the farm-yard; yet the tame Canada geese, when the nights grow crisp and the wild flocks go honking over, will scream and run and flap their crippled wings with a wild longing to fly away—high and far and long into the air.

It is little that most of us know of the wild geese besides this passing. But who has not seen the wonderful wedge, like a harrow moving across the sky, or the long file, like a strange many-oared shell, swimming the clouds? Who has not heard the thrilling trumpet-call out of the star-depths of the silent autumn night? Even in the heart of a vast city I have awakened at the cloud-echoed cry, far off, weird, and haunting.

High and swift as they move, the passage still is a long and dangerous one.

Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,
As, darkly painted on the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along.

True; but that height cannot always be sustained. The bird is flesh: such speed, though

the stroke be timed, rapidly exhausts ; the wings must rest ; the flier must have food ; and awaiting the descent is a line of enemies as long and almost as continuous as the course.

Fogs obscure the way ; storms hinder, noises confuse ; and often, most dangerous of all, across the brittle, bracing air of the course blows a thick, warm wind that sends the whole flock reeling and sagging to the earth. Hundreds of geese one day, overcome by a sudden wave of heat, dropped upon a small pond back of my home, and when the village turned out to the slaughter, the poor things scattered about the neighboring fields, too weak and heavy to rise higher than the tree-tops.

There is not a single event in all the year of the fields that I would not sooner forgo than the sight and sound of the flying geese. How it takes hold of the imagination ! There is no vivider passage in all of Audubon than his description of the flight :

“ As each successive night the hoar-frosts cover the country, and the streams are closed over by the ice, the family joins that in their neighborhood, which is also joined by others. At length

they espy the advance of a snow-storm, when the ganders with one accord sound the order for their departure.

“After many wide circlings, the flock has risen high in the thin air, and an hour or more is spent in teaching the young the order in which they are to move. But now the host has been marshaled, and off it starts. The old males advance in front, the females follow, the young come in succession according to their strength, the weakest forming the rear. Should one feel fatigued, his position is changed in the ranks, and he assumes a place in the wake of another, who cleaves the air before him; perhaps the parent bird flies for a while by his side to encourage him.”

What meaning, and yet what mystery, that line of winging geese has for us when we remember all this! The bare facts brought by the naturalist are wonderful enough. But, besides the naturalist, the poet also has watched that strange winging wedge across the sky, and the facts are forgotten in the deeper meaning, the deeper mystery of his suggestions. Not the flight of the birds themselves seems to me so perfect, so won-

derful, as the flight of these lines which a passing waterfowl inspired :

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast —
The desert and illimitable air —
Lone wandering, but not lost.

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain
flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.



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